THE MAN WITHOUT MERCY

BY CONCORDIA MERREL

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NOVELS BY

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THE MARRIAGE OF ANNE

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THE MAN WITHOUT MERCY

Chapter I

JUDITH CONNOR was not given to indulging the luxury of self-pity, but the suffocating heat of this particular Sunday morning towards the end of June seemed to be just one too many for her. It was one of those days that dawn with thick, muggy haze, through which, in town at least, the sun never seems to gather power to penetrate. As she came out of a city underground station—slowly, on account of the press of the daily wage-earners—into the busy, oppressive street, she had a feeling that the atmosphere was a heavy, lumpish weight, which she carried unaided upon the crown of her neat straw hat. Which was symbolic in its way; for Judith certainly had her share of burdens to bear.

It was her fate to be the one capable member of a singularly incapable family. To be strong where the rest were weak; steadfast where they were vacillating; to have the rare and important gift of "drive" where they were flabby. Having "drive," she was, paradoxically, prone to be driven. By circumstances; by poverty; by the necessity, since she was the only one of the family who had the grit to get out and do anything, of getting out and doing it. Above all, by the fact that blood is thicker than water, and that the sentiment of family loyalty was a hot-and-strong detail of her nature's make-up. She was twenty-two now, and had been a wage-earner since, at fifteen, she

became a very minor clerk in the firm of Hood & Jenkins, manufacturers of all kinds of office furniture. The gift of "drive" had taken her, by stages, to being, as she had now been for three years, secretary to the junior partner. Her salary, through its various stages of increase, had been the only entirely dependable and regular money the Connor family had known.

"Judith will see us through," was one of the family mottoes. "Leave it to Judith," was another.

Yet she had two perfectly able-bodied male relatives: her father, and a brother who was only one year younger than herself.

As she walked along the street, allowing—in a way not at all typical of her—the restless, hurrying crowd to jostle by her as it would, Judith thought of these two men, and frowned.

As a charming, blithe-eyed, attractive old waster, her father was assuredly at the top of the class; but as bread-winner and head of a family, he was simply an unmitigated nuisance. To work, that is to say, to get a steady, regular job, had never occurred to him, and if it occurred—most inconsiderately—to her, he reminded her with hurt, pathetic dignity, a flash of the blithe blue eyes, and the most fetching of brogues—specially put on for the occasion—that the blood of Irish kings ran, fierce and proud, in his veins, and that, bedad, there are *some* things which that sort of blood cannot stoop to. There were other things that it stooped to without turning a corpuscle. Things which gay Patrick Connor referred to as "enterprises," which, as far as Judith could see, generally meant that he spent several weeks—and considerably

more money than could be spared—in standing drinks and cigars to "useful" men; and followed it up by as many days in bemoaning his "accursed luck" and explaining volubly how near he had come to making the family fortune. Since he rarely got nearer than this, the making of the family fortune, in the hands of Judith's father, was a most expensive business. Only this morning he had dressed himself in all his doggy best and announced that he was hot on the scent of a new "enterprise," and that, bedad, the family fortune was as good as made.

Having no illusions left, where he was concerned, Judith was racked with doubts as to what that ambiguous word "enterprise" might cover.

It was like having a small, irresponsible boy to look after. Only worse. Because a husband and father cannot be lain across the knee and birched. If it hadn't been for her mother, her little, semi-invalid mother, whom she loved with a blind adoration that could see no fault, she sometimes felt that she would give up the effort to make her father amount to something and let him go to the dogs at his own pace. But of course she did not. Apart from her consideration for her mother there was that deep-down sense of family loyalty that was a thing born in her.

Her thoughts, turning to her brother, found nothing on which to rest and take comfort.

Pat, junior, was just as gay-eyed, handsome and persuasive as his father, and just as much of a hopeless jelly-fish. After four years of wasting expensively around, in and out of a variety of jobs, he had, three months ago, been forcibly pitchforked, by a business acquaintance of Judith's, into a surprisingly good

post, as one of the secretaries to Victor Jason, the head of a highly successful firm of electrical equipment makers.

Judith had been glad when he got the job, but she had had the most trying time of her life keeping him in it, and every Friday there was the weekly ugliness to be gone through of urging, persuading, bullying, threatening or otherwise inducing him to part with a proportion of his weekly salary for the benefit of the family exchequer.

She was still smarting from the scene of last evening. It had been something more than merely nerve-wearing. There had been a curious tenseness in Pat's manner, suggesting that he was strung taut with some excitement or stress. It had made her wonder, all through, what the young ass had been up to. Cards? Horses? Girls? . . . The three most usual explanations had jostled one another through her brain, deepening the feeling of hopelessness that always damped her courage when she considered the problem of this handsome, lazy, fatally attractive brother of hers.

This—seven acute years of it—was, briefly, what lay at the back of the feeling Judith had that this stifling Saturday was just one more than she could bear. This was what put the shadows round her grey-green eyes; made her always pale face paler than usual, so that her amazingly red lips looked painted by contrast; and gave to her courageous shoulders a little droop that was not at all typical of them.

At the corner, which brought her to an important and busy cross-road, she was held up by the traffic,

and stood on the kerb beneath a railway bridge, waiting for it to thin. And now, all at once, her listlessness dropped from her, for in the windows of a passing bus she saw, not the passengers behind the glass, but a vision that was as the mirage of an oasis is to the parched traveller in the desert: the flashing picture of green fields and trees.

Green fields and trees! In the heart of the hurrying, roaring, jangling, sweltering city!

Another bus passed and she saw it again. Eagerly she watched for it in the next three buses that went that way; two showed magical glimpses of it: touches of green and blue; the third displayed only an array of hats and shoulders. It dawned on her then that this phenomenon was no miracle; just the reflection of something coming from somewhere around her. She turned quickly and found the origin of it on a hoarding behind her. A railway company's poster; a huge, brilliant thing advertising the charms of "Rural Hertfordshire," and the consummate ease and luxury with which their line would carry you there.

Rural Hertfordshire! Judith read the two words, and drew a breath. They sounded good.

The picture beneath the words was a somewhat "arty" illustration of them. A thing of flat, bright colours; a green field; a red-roofed cottage; a winding stream; a meditative cow. A distance, composed of purple hills, dark pine trees, brilliantly blue sky, and cotton-woolly clouds. A libel, perhaps, upon nature, but suggestive enough to catch at Judith's imagination. Rural Hertfordshire! It sounded cool; open; airy; everything that this oppressive city morn-

ing was not. She stood drinking it in through her eyes, and seemed to feel the lovely, peaceful stillness of it as she looked.

But that was only a lull in the roar of the traffic which the controller, with one superb gesture, had caused, by stopping the nearest line of miscellaneous vehicles, and Judith came back to reality and scurried across the road, while the gesture held and the scurrying was good.

The poster was left behind, but its message went with her. "Rural Hertfordshire!" The two words haunted her all through a tiresome morning of finishing off the tag-ends of a week's work for a chief who was as fretful as a teething baby and was only bent on getting off in his car to the country, and golf, for the week-end. To Rural Hertfordshire perhaps. To somewhere, anyway, where there were green fields and trees and red-roofed cottages, and cows, and cotton-woolly clouds. Oh, lucky chief! Thrice lucky chief!

The luck of other people, which was a thing Judith did not usually dwell upon, was accented when the senior partner's secretary told her, as they were leaving round about one o'clock, that she was going out into the country on the pillion of her boy's motor bicycle. Some people had everything! Country places, cars, boys to take them on pillions! There was an ache that was seven years strong in Judith's heart as she once more turned out into the street, teeming now with the heavy noonday heat.

She passed the Rural Hertfordshire poster almost at a run; afraid, positively afraid, to look at it again. And then stopped suddenly, held by a quick, over-

powering impulse; turned back deliberately, went and stood right in front of the poster, and looked her fill.

Rural Hertfordshire. Little over an hour took you there. You went from Baker Street Station. The poster told everything; even to a list of delicious sounding names: Duke's Meadow; Crayley Green; Chemming Wood; and others. She suddenly decided that she must see Rural Hertfordshire; must breathe the clear air of it; see the green and blue of it; know the peace and stillness of it. *Must.* It was an urge that came from a longing set so deep within her that it was imperative; not to be disobeyed.

She settled that she would go to Chemming Wood; the sound of it appealed to her, and with the decision, the weight of the torrid day, the weight even of seven years, was lifted blessedly from her, and her heart seemed to sing within her breast, happy, relieved, free.

First, she sent a telegram to her mother saying that she would not be in until quite late. Then she turned into a shop and bought some sandwiches. Then she plunged down into the underground and started for Baker Street.

The Chemming Wood train was pretty well filled, but she managed to find a seat, and settled into it contentedly. The other passengers were city men almost to a man; hard-working, moderately prosperous citizens; the sort of men about whom it is said that they are the backbone of the race, and have made their country what it is. So that it was rather startling when into this staid atmosphere something like a whirlwind suddenly broke. The door of the carriage

was flung wide, a suit-case thrust in, and the whirlwind resolved itself into a big man, bringing an open-air flavour of Harris tweed along with him, and looking as if this was the very first time he had ever been nearer to any sort of city than a heather-clad moor. He caused quite a little sensation. All eyes were raised to watch him as he made his way to a seat, settled his suit-case beneath him, and, breathing quickly from his hurry, looked around him in an interested, friendly way which was unusual.

Judith looked at him along with the rest; he was sitting on the opposite side, at an oblique angle to herself, so observation was easy.

"All blue and brown," was how she mentally summed him up; an impression given by vivid blue eyes set in mahogany tan; and a glimpse of butcher blue shirt showing between lapels of brown tweed. She was interested. Never, she thought, had she seen any human thing who looked so utterly and absolutely fit. Big, lean and sinewy, with tiny sun-wrinkles around the vivid blue eyes that made her say to herself quickly:

"Oh, the east, of course. Or somewhere where the sun really does shine."

She was absorbed in this interesting detective work when he repaid her interest with a glance in her direction. But evidently the pale oval of her face, the vivid red of her lips, the limpid green-grey of her eyes and the dusky sheen of her hair were not as novel to him as his tanner, whalebone vigour was to her, for after a quick, keen, flashing glance that was most unflatteringly brief, he turned away, took a

map out of his pocket, opened it as well as the restricted space allowed, and became absorbed in it.

Judith laughed within herself, not sufficiently vain to be chagrined by the lack of interest shown by a strange man, took from her handbag the novel that she carried to and from the office, and read until the train passed into open country. When that happened, and she found that the sun was shining from a sky of flawless blue, she forgot man, book, everything except the sunlit greens of early summer pastures as they flashed, in patchwork pageant, past her.

The passengers began to thin away, as station after station was reached, until at Chemming Wood only one portly whiskered gentleman and the blue and brown man were left. Judith got up quickly and made for the door. The blue and brown man, a good deal to her surprise, rose, saying:

"Let me," and opened the door for her. She thanked him, and their eyes met fleetingly; he smiled slightly; she smiled slightly in return, and stepped out on to the platform. She caught a last glimpse of the back of his head as the train moved out, but he did not turn to catch any last glimpse of her. So she chuckled within herself again, saying silently:

"As a magnet for strange, interesting-looking men, my dear, you're about as successful as a cross-eyed Hottentot!" and hurried out of the station.

Standing in the white road, she looked round her. A common sloped up from the road to the right; a straight, formal hill rose on the left. She chose the common and was glad for ever after that she had, for when she had climbed to the highest point of it,

Rural Hertfordshire, a great sweeping panorama of it, was hers just for a look. And *how* she looked! Standing on tip-toe in sheer exultation! Behind her, the road and station she had come from; before her, a valley, its depths marked by the silver shimmer of a stream. Fields, green and gold, clad the hill on the other side; beyond them, another stretch of common land, topped by dusky pines that spired up, straight and positive, into the cloudless blue.

She looked with wide, shining eyes and took in deep breaths of crystalline air. The city, with its muggy heat, was glorious long miles away. Her father, brother, and all the difficulties they stood for, were forgotten. This was a moment too perfect to be marred by ugly thoughts. She stood drinking it in; letting it calm and heal. Storing her spirit with the refreshment of it; allowing a sort of ecstasy of satisfaction to fill her. She envied no man or woman now. And through her parted lips came a whisper:

"Lovely; lovely; *lovely*. . . ."

How many miles Judith walked that day she never could reckon. Up to the top of this second hill; through the dim purple shade of the pine wood, where she paused to eat her sandwiches; over stiles, across fields, fields, and again fields, until, rather footsore, but utterly at peace, she reached a village that was composed, as far as she could see, of nothing more than two irregular lines of tiny cottages and shops, with an undulating green, and a curving white road between them. She walked along the white road, sense of adventure still beating in her heart, past a forge, where a burly blacksmith, silhouetted against the glowing furnace, was shoeing

a cart-horse; looked into the window of a little shop where everything in the world, from bull's-eyes to bedsteads, seemed to be untidily for sale; passed the time of day with an old cobbler who was mending shoes in a queer little shanty; and saw the local test team carrying stumps of all lengths, firewood bails, and an undersized bat; shouting, screaming, tussling, running, jumping and pummelling one another, on their way to a somewhat undulating cricket pitch at the far end of the green.

Finally, she found herself before a deep-roofed cottage, with mossy tiles and weather-beaten brickwork. There was a porch covered with the first pale pink flush of the season's rambler roses, beside which a board, nailed rather squiffily to a post, bore this legend in letters of all sorts and sizes:

TEA 2

GOOD STABLING

Judith having no use for stabling, good or otherwise, but being, by this time, utterly parched for tea, went to the cottage door and knocked.

A tiny old woman, bent nearly double, with a wrinkled pale face and white hair gathered into a coarse black chenille net, answered her summons and invited her through the spotless cottage into a surprisingly large garden at the back, which was set with chairs and tea-tables and ablaze all round with more of the pink rambler roses. They rambled up trellises, over arches and summer houses, and trailed from swinging wire baskets.

Judith stopped and said:

"Oh, how pretty! How pretty!" and the little old woman chuckled and mumbled toothlessly:

"Folks come from all aroun' to see our garden. There ain't another one alike it, not for 'undreds o' miles. Sit down, miss, where you will. I'll call me gran'datter to you." She shuffled off, leaving Judith to settle herself.

There was only one party having tea—rather noisily—so Judith had the pick of the tables. She decided that she would see more of this paradise of roses before sitting down. Accordingly she walked along a gravel path that bordered the rough lawn; peeped into a summer house, and thought that, in spite of the blushing glory with which it was covered, it distinctly suggested earwigs; moved round to the back of it, and—found herself looking straight at the blue and brown man of the train.

She caught a breath of utter surprise, and stopped. He was sitting at a table drumming his lean, brown fingers on its little round top, and glanced up quickly. He recognized her and rose immediately; then remembered that they were not officially acquainted; realized, too, that this meeting had taken her completely by surprise, and finally rescued the situation with a smile.

"May I say how do you do?" he asked, with a nice courtesy that banished her momentary awkwardness.

"Yes," she answered, "and I'll return the greeting."

They each made a polite little bow and then stood looking at each other, and he scanned her very thoroughly now, from the crown of her neat hat down to

her dusty shoes. His eyes came back to hers, a touch of wonder in their expression.

"Have you *walked* all the way from Chemming Wood?" he asked.

"Every inch of it," she told him. "Up hill and down dale, and along the most lovely white roads, and through the divinest of fields. . . ."

"But it's eight miles."

"Is it? I didn't notice the distance."

"What a splendid spirit to bring to a long walk on a hot day!" he said, with a laugh.

"Oh, but what a splendid walk and what a gorgeous hot day," she retorted, laughing slightly, too. Judith was not shy; she had been on her own too long not to have had shyness knocked out of her; but she was usually rather reserved. The senior partner's secretary used to describe her as "an *inward* sort of girl, if you know what I mean." And the junior partner had been heard to say that there was a lot more in that Connor girl's brain than ever came out of her mouth.

What the blue and brown man thought about her was that he never had met a girl who looked you so squarely in the eyes when she spoke as this girl did. What he next said to her, after a moment of silence, was:

"It's done you a world of good, anyway. You look much better."

"Better?"

"Than you did in the train," he explained.

So he *had* noticed her more minutely than she had imagined.

"Not *quite* such a cross-eyed Hottentot after all,"

she said to herself, her spirits rising to sudden gay heights. "I had just come from a grilling morning in a city office," she explained aloud.

"Nuff said!" he cried with another laugh. "That would explain the whitest face in the world."

"Was mine quite that?" she challenged, enjoying the encounter a good deal.

"Next thing to it, I thought!" he answered quite seriously.

"And I thought *yours* was quite one of the tanniest."

They laughed again, together this time. The little sun-wrinkles gave a delightful humour to his eyes, she thought, when laughter deepened them.

"Having tea here?" he asked after a moment.

"Yes. *Isn't* it a heavenly garden?"

"You are evidently in a mood to enjoy everything you meet with to-day. I suppose that even the suggestion of spiders and earwigs wouldn't make you think less of the roses?"

"Not a bit," she declared stoutly. "I'd even go so far as to say that the spiders and earwigs have as much right to enjoy the roses as we have!"

Their eyes met again, friendly and understanding.

"I haven't had tea yet. Couldn't we have it together?" he suggested. "As fellow travellers meeting in the wilderness?" A touch of respectful bashfulness made the invitation altogether charming. She hesitated not at all this time.

"I'd like to," she said simply.

Chapter II

JUDITH enjoyed that tea as she never remembered enjoying anything before. She felt perfectly at ease with the blue and brown man. For he seemed to suit the open-air adventure of it; to be the best possible sort of person to encounter at the close of an afternoon spent amid the greens and golds and blues and browns of nature. She found that she could talk to him freely, and what was more, enjoyed doing it. It seemed, too, that he enjoyed talking to her, and he said one or two things that afternoon that she was destined to remember.

She told him in detail where she had walked that day, and he fished his map out of his pocket, fetched the nearest table, set it beside their own, and spread the map upon it. Bending sideways, she watched while with a pencil he traced the route she had taken. He then pointed out a dot and said:

"That's the station I got out at. The one beyond yours."

"Where did you go then?" she inquired.

"Along here." The pencil trailed it. "To have a look at this farm. Here it is, look. Darley's farm. A snug little place just outside this village."

"Are you going to buy it?"

"Thinking of it. Seems to me it's about time I staked a claim in the old country so that I'll have somewhere to settle down in my old age."

The prospect seemed to make him a little rueful; his grimace was comical.

"Don't you like the idea of settling down?" she asked, smiling. It appeared he didn't. His ideal of existence, she gathered from what he told her, scrappily, little by little, as tea progressed, was to be free to wander about the globe, going from one remote and uncomfortable spot to another. He had worked on a cattle farm in Tasmania; done four years warfaring; hunted bears in the Rockies; lions in Africa; tigers in India. Had been wild and woolly in the west; mixed up in a revolution in Mexico; and then, as he said, in finishing up:

"I come back to have a look at a quiet English farm; fetch up in a rose garden in a tiny English village, and lo and behold, meet with one of the most interesting adventures it is possible to meet with!" He smiled across at her as he spoke. But Judith didn't smile back, and he was quick to notice it.

"I *mean* that, you know," he added.

She looked at him a little doubtingly.

"Do you?" she asked.

"Is there a more interesting adventure in the whole of life than the adventure of meeting a new mind? A new personality? And making discoveries about both?"

Her face cleared. She had suspected him of making a pretty speech. She told him of her suspicion, laughing at herself for it. His look of horror at the bare notion of such a thing made her turn the laugh against him.

"I . . . I shouldn't know *how!*" he protested.

"Of course you wouldn't. I ought to have known,"

she cried merrily. "And I rather suspect that I ought to apologize. So I do."

He bowed slightly in acceptance.

"Let's get on with the adventure then," he said, much relieved. "By the way . . ." He turned up a corner of the map and pointed out a scribbled name upon the cover. "That's me."

She leaned sideways to read it.

"James Barry. Thank you," she said. "And . . ." She produced the book she had been reading in the train, opened just the cover and held it up in front of him.

"That's *me,*" she finished, displaying her name in characteristically neat lettering.

He read in turn.

"Irish?" he asked.

"Remotely," she admitted. "Much more remotely than the name suggests." A memory of her father's plea of kingly blood and his affectation of a brogue to excuse his natural antipathy for work made her frown quickly. He switched off the topic.

"And what does Judith Connor *do?*" he asked.

"Judith Connor works in a city office," she answered, snapping the book to again and putting it back into her handbag. "Not so exciting as potting grizzlies."

He didn't speak for a moment; when he did, he said one of the things that she was to remember again and again and long afterwards. He said it slowly; thoughtfully.

"It's not so much the type of life we lead, or the kind of work we do. It's what we bring to it that counts."

"That's a gallant thought," she said, with a quick little intake of breath.

"Inspired by a gallant girl, then," he answered, and added quickly, "No, it's *not* a pretty speech."

A warm colour came into her cheeks.

"You wouldn't have said it if you'd seen me this morning," she said in a slightly lower voice.

"Sweltering in the city office?"

She nodded. "And just feebly making up my mind to wilt."

"Nothing can disguise courageous eyes. Didn't you know that?" His tone was refreshingly impersonal.

"You've learnt a lot, potting grizzlies," she smiled.

"We've most of us got camel's backs when it comes to carrying that last straw," he remarked.

Again she caught a quick breath.

"Oh, how did you know that sweltering in the office was the last straw?" she breathed, faltering.

"I've learnt a lot, potting grizzlies," he reminded her.

For a moment their acquaintanceship warmed so quickly that it almost ripened, in a single flash of time, into full, acknowledged friendship.

"Something at the back of that wilting," he said to himself; but he was diffident of asking.

"I could tell him anything in the whole world," she thought, amazed at herself, and rather dazzled by the realization. But she was shy of telling. And so the ripening of the friendship between them was put off. If it hadn't been, things might have happened differently for Judith. But there is no looking ahead.

The moment slid by, and they let it go, not ready yet to take all that it could have meant; not realizing

that it held the biggest of all human possibilities; untroubled by the thought that opportunity, once missed, might not pass their way again.

And, above all, unable to foresee that the morrow might bring them bitter need of each other.

They talked, after that, of less personal things. Of books they had read; of life as they had lived it; of human nature as they had met with it—she in her city office, he in various, far regions.

"It's all, curiously, much the same," he observed. "All the world over, the same impulses are stirring; customs differ, but who's to say that one set of customs is any more ludicrous than another? Civilization is a pretty barbaric business after all. Only barbarians are more direct; more single-purposed; less confused with complexes."

She looked at him with limpid grey-green eyes wide and questioning.

"It's the superficials that differ," he went on. "Chinese women used to cramp their feet; English women, their waists. Savage women wear rings in their noses; civilized women, in their ears. Where's the big, fundamental difference? I can't see it."

Neither could Judith. She sat thinking. She was used to people who talked of things; this man talked of *ideas;* it was interesting; refreshing. She found new thoughts waking up in her brain.

"It's true," she admitted at last. "Fashions, lately, have been comparable too, haven't they? I mean, some of the dresses. . . ."

"Or lack of 'em," he put in.

"Yes. And dances. . . ."

"Good Lord, I've seen some dancing in cities that

would make certain gentle savages I've met turn green!"

"Then we hunt, too, don't we? We organize it and make a gentlemanly sport of it, but it's still hunting, isn't it?" she pursued interestedly.

"The hunting instinct is undying, because it's wrapped up in the question of self-preservation. Savage man hunts in the jungles; civilized man in the cities. Savage man preys upon beasts; civilized man upon—*man*. Savage man wraps his wife in the skin of the leopard he has slain, and says lo! I am a mighty hunter! Civilized man says it with sables. Savage man arms himself with a spear; civilized man with a can-opener!"

Judith broke in, laughing. "You've got the contrasts all neatly catalogued," she said, "but you don't seem to think that civilized man is anything to shout about."

"On the contrary, I think he's the marvel of creation," he answered, laughing with her. "The wonders of achievements his brain has performed! The discoveries he's made; the inventions he has worked out! Has it ever struck you that the hundred years immediately behind us were years of sheer miracle in scientific and mechanical things?"

She shook her head.

"And you accuse me of not thinking highly enough of civilized man!" he cried. "You don't seem to have done him the honour of thinking of him at all! Why, roughly, a hundred years ago people were shaking their heads over Stephenson's locomotive, and saying that it would never kill coaching! That there

would always be those who would cling to the good old way."

"A hundred years," said Judith. "Well, it certainly isn't so very long when you come to think of it. I've lived nearly a quarter of that. Four times my lifetime and they went from coaching to express trains!"

"Further than that—to flying," he put in. "A hundred years between the coach and the aeroplane. A hundred years between the old windjammer and the ocean liner. A hundred years between the express messenger and—wireless. With television, moreover, already waiting on the mat. There are contrasts for you!"

Judith nodded; her eyes wide and interested; and he added:

"A hundred years between the old muzzle-loader and the Big Bertha. There never *has* been such a hundred years! And all achieved by that civilized man you say I've so small an opinion of! Why nearly all the marvels that distinguish this age were made possible by his work during that hundred years."

"The war, too, I suppose," put in Judith.

"The war, too, of course," he agreed.

"I wonder if they ever thought of that?" she said slowly.

"They?"

"The ones that thought out the miracles."

"Those quiet, gentle, painstaking men? No. I'm perfectly sure they never did," he said positively, and then leaned across the table and added: "It's odd you should say that. When I was busy helping to say it

with machine-guns, I used sometimes to wonder just that: what their feelings would be if they could see what the children of their brains had made possible. I used to have visions of them choking 'em off in babyhood and sneaking out and burying them deep and secretly in the back garden."

Judith nodded and was silent for a while.

"But then," she added argumentatively, "we shouldn't have had all the good and peaceful results, either."

"Of course we shouldn't; so on the whole everything is for the best and according to plan. What a nice, sane brand of optimism you go in for!"

She laughed a little.

"All the same," she said truthfully, "I believe I should have tried not to think of them—the miracle-workers, I mean—just at the moment when I was saying it with machine-guns."

"I'm afraid that there are lots of things one doesn't like once one begins thinking in those contrasts of yours. The jungle and the city seem to draw so disconcertingly near together. And for sheer unadulterated, diabolical *cruelty,* the city makes the jungle look like a tiny tots' Sunday school class." The colloquialism at the finish robbed the word of sententiousness. He had a knack of saying such things in a pleasant, conversational manner, but, although Judith only smiled at it now, it was another of the things that she was destined to remember later. Not so very much later, either. Their talk drifted along into all sorts of channels after this, so pleasantly and so companionably that it was only when Judith realized that the afternoon brilliance of the sunshine was dimming

towards the slanting light of early evening that she remembered that the last train back to town left Chemming Wood at nine, and that eight good miles —some of them standing nearly on end, too—lay between this enchanted rose garden and the station. She sprang up in dismay and explained to James Barry. He calmed her fears at once.

"There's the perfectly good station *I* came to, only a mile and a half away," he said. "And that same train that leaves *your* station at nine probably goes through mine at about half-past eight or thereabouts. An extra ticket from my station to yours will settle matters nicely."

A borrowed time-table proved him right, and a little later they were on their way to the station. There was no great hurry now, and they took it easily; but almost completely silently. Only twice on the way was the silence broken between them. Once when he pointed to wide white gates across a field at one side of the road and said:

"See those gates? That's Darley's farm."

She looked, and nodded, and said:

"It looks an awfully jolly place."

And again, some ten minutes later, when she suddenly said:

"I *wanted* this day, and it happened. Isn't that rather wonderful?" She sighed; a full-hearted sigh of contentment.

"Wonderful," he agreed. "I hope I didn't barge in on the wonder of it?"

"You didn't," she assured him quickly. "You reappeared exactly at the right moment; just when I was beginning to want someone to tell it all to. If you had

been a towny man, it would have been different. But you were right; open air, and—understanding."

They reached the station now. The platform was more or less deserted, and they strolled up and down, filling in the few minutes of waiting.

"Are you going back to town to-night?" she asked, after a while.

"No; I'm dossing at the local inn. Going over the farm again to-morrow."

"And if you decide to take it?"

"Just one more fling, and then—down I settle," he laughed.

"One more fling?" she queried. "Do you mean that you are going away again? Out of England?"

He nodded.

"Soon?"

"Early next week."

That was unexpected and she said a quick "Oh" of surprise. Then added: "How casually you take it. *I'd* be preparing for weeks, and be in a perfect fever of anticipation." She laughed with a touch of breathlessness.

"Not when you'd become as used to buzzing off at fifteen minutes' notice as I have."

"And you'll be back—when?"

"This time next year, perhaps."

Judith was silent.

"Will you remember me, and have tea with me again?" he asked after a moment.

"In the rose garden?" She sent a little look up to him with the question.

He looked down at her. "Yes. Shall we call it a date?"

She laughed slightly, then nodded.

"All right," she agreed. "It would be rather good fun. To-day's the twenty-sixth. I shall not forget."

Her train came in now, and he put her into a compartment.

She leaned out of the window, feeling suddenly that there were a hundred things she wanted to say and no time to say them in.

"Haven't you any people to keep you in England?" she asked hurriedly.

"Not a soul," he replied. "My mother died when I was born; my father, two years later. I was looked after by an aged aunt, until she couldn't cope with me any longer, and then packed off to Tasmania to an uncle. The aunt died last year, aged ninety-six. I'm here to-day; gone to-morrow. Something in the blood, I suppose, that keeps one on the move. It's a restless age."

The train began to move slowly. She put out her hand and he grasped it quickly, walking along beside her.

"Good-bye, and thank you for putting the finishing touch to my day," she said.

He had to release her hand then, owing to the gathering speed of the train.

"Twenty-sixth of June, next year," he called, waving his hat.

She nodded, smiled and waved her hand. The train rounded a bend, and he was blotted from her view.

She sank back into her corner, the smile still on her lips. Goodness! How tired she was! And how happy! A delicious feeling of healthful, drowsy languor be-

gan to steal over her. She tried, without making an effort of it, to sort out her impressions of the afternoon; and failed because they were still all too fresh. She contented herself with allowing little visions of sights; little echoes of sounds; little fragments of conversation, to scatter through her memory as they would, and in being glad of everything that had happened. And James Barry? Something new; something unexpected; something *good*. Yes, she was glad James Barry had happened, too.

She finally summed up the whole adventure, as she got out once more at Baker Street Station, with the telling catch-phrase; speaking it half aloud and wholly happily:

"The end of a perfect day!"

. . . . . .

It was past eleven when she reached home; a small flat, out Ealing way. As she went up the stone stairway, lighted now, with only the most economical glimmer, to the top floor, she involuntarily braced her shoulders; a little habit that years of never knowing *what* she might hear on going in had given her. Just as she was putting her key into the lock, she heard her name called in a whisper, and swung round abruptly, startled. Her brother appeared out of the shadow of the deep-set landing window, and came towards her.

She stood still, horrified by his appearance. He was pale even to the lips, and the dim light of the landing shed a queer greenish colour upon him. The handsome blue eyes had lost their gaiety, and his always weak mouth seemed to sag badly. There was

altogether an air about him that she could only describe to herself as ghastly.

"I've been waiting for you, Jude," he whispered, passing his tongue over his lips as if they were dry and inflexible.

"Pat!" she exclaimed, whispering too. "What on earth's the matter? Why are you waiting out here? Why don't you go in?"

He shook his head, and raised a cautioning finger to his lips.

"Be quiet. . . . Be quiet," he said quickly, dropping his whispered voice lower. "They may be here for all I know."

"*They?* Here? What d'you mean?" she asked, still searching him over with perplexed eyes.

"*They* . . . the . . . Oh, anyone." The words stuttered out in a peculiarly terrified way, and he relaxed against the wall, tilted his hat to the back of his head, and passed an unsteady hand across his forehead. She thought she knew what was the matter then, and her lip curved disgustedly, but before she could speak he caught her arm in a painful grip and whispered excitedly:

"You go in first and find out whether there's been anyone to see me, and come back and tell me. Only get mother and dad out of the way. Don't let them hear me. I can't be bothered with 'em to-night. Find out, and come and tell me, Jude."

She was sure that she knew then, and said sharply:

"Pat, you're drunk. You've been drinking."

"I haven't, Judy, 'pon my soul," he declared. "Nothing to speak of, anyway."

She flung away from him, unbelievingly.

"Come in and go to bed and sleep it off," she said curtly. But he only clung tighter to her arm and answered:

"It isn't that. It's just that I'm . . . I'm in a devil of a hole, Jude. A devil of a hole. . . . And you must help me. Do as I say, Jude; for the love of mercy, do as I say. . . ."

Chapter III

JUDITH was badly startled now. If part of his trouble was that he had been drinking, that certainly did not tell the whole story. There was something more, and remembering the scene of last night, an agony of doubts and fears clamoured suddenly within her. Instinct told her to obey him; she nodded and, without speaking, opened the door and let herself into the flat. Her heart was beating quickly, and she stood for a moment, drawing deep breaths to steady herself. The sound of her latch-key was the cue for her father's voice to make itself heard from the living-room.

"That you, Judy?"

"Yes, father," she answered, and went and put her head round the door.

"And a nice time to come home to your poor old dad who's been slavin' all the day; slavin', I'm tellin' ye, Judy! Slavin' to lift the family's shattered fortunes. . . ." Mr. Connor's white head appeared above the back of the deepest armchair in the room; his slippered feet were hoisted on to the seat of a second chair; the evening paper was in his hand; a whisky and soda was on a small table convenient to his reach; and the room was full of cigar smoke. The brogue was in full force; it always was when he wanted to stress a sentimental appeal, or whenever

he had a "day with the boys" to conceal. Judith knew the symptoms well. If she had not been anxious about Pat she could have laughed. As it was, all she wanted was to keep him from suspecting that anything was wrong.

"How high have you managed to lift the fortunes?" she asked with irony.

"Ah! The nasty, scornful way of her!" cried Connor in a disgusted tone, but much too comfortable to bother to turn round. "Your poor mother gone to bed with one of her headaches and me sittin' here all alone. All alone, I say, after me hard day's work. . . ."

"And—Pat?" she asked, as casually as she could.

"And there's another undutiful child!" exclaimed Mr. Connor, very deeply injured. "Pat's not in yet. Came slamming in early, so your mother tells me, and finding you weren't here, went slamming out again, and hasn't been seen since."

"I suppose he had a date in a hurry," she broke in. "Anyone been here?"

"And who would have been?" he answered; then: "Jude, is there such a thing as a ten-shilling note in your bag that you've no use for? Just one 'small Fish' out of water, girl?" His always delightful voice dropped to the crooning, persuasive, musical note that was peculiar to these appeals. He had the sort of voice to turn the laugh of a hyena to tears, but Judith was too used to it to be moved.

"No, there isn't," she said shortly and decisively.

"Ah, the ungrateful, hard-hearted—— Jude, five shillings wouldn't come amiss to me."

"Nor to me either, father."

"It's a stone you've got for a heart, girl! After all me work! After all me thought and scheming! Make it half-a-crown, Judy. Come, now; I've expenses to meet to-morrow, and the chance of a lifetime hangin' on it."

To get away, she gave in, found half-a-crown and went to him with it.

"Is the family fortune lifted as high as all that?" she said as she gave him the coin.

"Ah, the nasty, scornful . . ." he began, much aggrieved, but firmly pocketing the money.

She didn't wait to hear the end of a well-worn sentence. She had found out what she wanted to know, so she bade him a quick good-night, and left him. Tip-toed, then, to her mother's room and found, to her infinite relief, that the little woman was comfortably asleep. She stood for just a moment looking down at the face that was, to her, the most beloved face in the world. So delicate and pale! Judith always felt shot through with fears when she noted the pale delicacy of her mother's face, for just less than a year ago the little woman had suddenly collapsed in a fainting fit, and the doctor had told Judith that there was definite heart trouble to beware of, and that all physical strain and mental shock must be avoided. That was chiefly why she was so anxious that her mother should hear nothing of Pat's trouble, whatever it might be. All the strength of family love that should have been shared between three had become concentrated upon her mother. She knew well enough that handsome Pat, of the debonair blue eyes, was the favourite; the adored; the petted; the pampered; but she accepted that fact

with philosophy. Mothers mostly seemed to adore their sons above their daughters.

She thanked heaven that her mother was asleep, and would run no chance of seeing the pale, cowed, shaken thing that the adored son had suddenly become.

She crept out, along the hall, opened the front door silently, and beckoned to Pat.

"No one's been. Come in," she said, her lips forming the words almost soundlessly.

He followed her in, pushing her feverishly along the hall to her own room. He crowded in after her, put on the light, shut the door and locked it, and then leaned back against it facing her again.

"Where the devil have you been all day?" he demanded.

Looking at him she found her heart beating fast again. She put out a hand as if to ward off something she could not yet see.

"Where've you been?" he repeated.

"I've been into the country," she said tremulously. "I've had a rather lovely day. Try not to spoil it for me now, will you, Pat?"

But he only laughed oddly and said:

"Lovely day? In the country? And I . . . Oh, my God, Jude . . . I . . ." He suddenly covered his face with his hands.

She revised her opinion altogether now as to his being drunk, and was filled with sudden fear that it might be even worse. That fear that always knocked at her heart when her father spoke of a new "enterprise." Somehow, though, hopeless as Pat had always seemed, she had not felt exactly *that* fear about

him, until this moment. It stabbed through her now, setting up a racket in her heart, which settled almost at once, leaving her calm and quiet-voiced. She went to him, removed his hat for him, flung it on her bed, took him by the arm and thrust him down into a chair, then stood before him and said:

"Tell me."

He raised a ravaged face to hers.

"I'm in a fix, Jude. In a ghastly fix," he said, almost panting.

"Money?" She kept her voice low, because her mother's room was next to hers.

"Yes—in a way."

"In a way? What do you mean?"

He looked at her a moment with half-dazed eyes, then laughed suddenly. It was a bad sound to hear, that laugh.

"It's . . . Jude, there's money missing . . . at the office."

She raised a quick hand to her mouth as if to stifle a cry.

"Yes?" The question came, hardly audible, through her fingers.

"They . . . they think I've taken it," he blurted out.

A silence followed, in which his words seemed to hang. Then:

"Why do they think that?"—a sharp note in her voice now.

"Because there's some muddle over my books . . . I have a lot to do with the boss's private account . . . and it's that that's . . . queer; muddled; gone wrong somehow."

"But you could explain, of course?"

"I couldn't!"

"Why not?"

He suddenly thumped a closed fist into the palm of his other hand.

"Good God! Don't stand there looking at me in that ghastly, still way!" he cried jerkily.

She didn't move.

"Why couldn't you explain?" she insisted steadily.

"Because . . . because . . . Well, hang it, I *did* explain."

"And they wouldn't believe you?"

He shook his head.

"*Why* wouldn't they?"

The steady voice seemed to goad him almost to frenzy. He sprang up, stuttering out something incoherent; then sank weakly down again, burying his face in his hands once more.

She knew, then, and a voice somewhere within her seemed to say, "It's come; I always knew it would." But that it should come from Pat! Her mother's ewe lamb!

Aloud she said, slowly, draggingly:

"They wouldn't believe you because they knew they were right."

Up came his face again, stupid indignation making him look extraordinarily like his father.

"What!" he cried.

"They knew they were right. You *have* taken it."

His nerves seemed to crack, then; he leaned back in the chair, frankly sobbing.

"Isn't it awful! . . . Isn't it awful! . . ." he blubbered out.

She raised a warning hand.

"Hush, mother's in the next room. Yes, Pat, it's pretty awful."

"Damn it, haven't you an ounce of sympathy in you!"

She stared down at him. Things come to one, sometimes, in moments of stress: odd, irrelevant things. One came to Judith now; and it was that no one human being can ever see the intimate, minute workings of another human being's brain. She looked at Pat and found herself up against a blank wall of granite incomprehensibility. Sympathy; he snivelled for sympathy at a moment like this! It was beyond belief. Beyond the utility of anger or argument. She let it go.

"How much have you taken?" she asked.

"Oh, I don't know! They say it's three hundred pounds." His voice had dropped to a whisper again.

She caught a breath.

"Three hundred! Three *hundred!* But what's it been for? Where's it gone? What have you *wanted* it for? Spent it on?"

The answer to that came in broken, self-excusing phrases, and it was a very stale old answer too. A story of fresh acquaintances; swagger; the desire to impress. Of gambling; debt; fear and desperation. And then the discovery that it was extraordinarily easy to wangle small sums from the chief's private account into his own pocket; the growth of those small sums into larger ones. The apparent lack of any sort of suspicion.

"*That's* what did it," he finished, aggrieved. "No one let on they suspected anything. But the boss knew

almost from the first, I believe. That's the sort of inhuman fiend he is . . . letting you go on and on and then . . . *pouncing* on you. . . . That's the sort of devil Victor Jason is! Smiling and smiling and smiling, and all the time ready to tear you tooth and nail. Just watching and waiting for the chance. He's always been soft soap to me. . . . Let me think I could do anything with him and all that. And then when old Grimwade hauled me up before him he looked at me as if he were going to skin me alive! I denied everything at first. . . . But he just sat there and nagged questions at me till I couldn't stick it. . . . Talk of the third degree! He made me write a confession. . . . Made me write it and sign it. . . . The beast! The beast!" He struck his hands together in impotent fury. His cheeks showed a spot of colour now, and the shine in his eyes was unpleasant to see.

"Well, you've taken three hundred pounds of his money," said Judith quietly. Even at the moment she was conscious of a feeling of amazement that she could keep her words so calm; her voice so low and steady. But now that the blow that she had always dreaded had fallen, she found her brain curiously clear; her thoughts alert. And to break down in any sort of way did not remotely occur to her.

"You wrote your confession and signed it; well, what happened then?" she added.

"The boss said he was going to have me . . . arrested. . . . I came back to find you. . . . And you weren't here. . . . What in hell do you want to go kiting out into the country just when you're needed?" It was a relief to him, evidently, to voice that griev-

ance, for he straightened up slightly once it was spoken.

She ignored it.

"What did you need me for?" she asked.

"I thought of clearing out while the clearing was good."

"Well, why didn't you?"

"I . . . I didn't know where to go!" he blurted out.

She could almost have laughed at that; it was so typical. "Leave it to Judith!" He couldn't even run away without her help!

"What did you imagine I'd do? Take you to the station, buy your ticket for you, put you into a train and kiss you good-bye?" she asked, with a touch of bitterness. "I marvel that you didn't ask me to steal the money for you!"

"Steal!" he cried again with stupid indignation.

"Yes, *steal,*" she insisted in a sibilant whisper. "And get that quite clear."

She broke off and moved away, took a few turns round the room and came back.

"And get this clear, too: you do *not* do any clearing out. Understand?"

He nodded, cowed by her air of calmness and strength. Soothed by it, too.

"What'll I do then? D'you imagine I'm going to face the music?" he demanded fretfully.

"You may have to; and I don't suppose it will be exactly a lullaby. But you aren't going to, if I can help it."

His blotched face lit up a little.

"There! I knew you'd help. You've got the money,

haven't you? Tied up in an old stocking somewhere. Haven't you? Always knew you were a deep one. . . . Jude, let me have the money and I swear to you . . ."

"Don't talk like an idiot!" she broke in sharply. "I haven't been able to save even my holiday money this year."

"Then . . . what are you going to do?" he asked weakly, the light fading from his face again.

"I don't know. But I'll try to think of a way out; on two conditions: that you don't attempt to do a get-away—it's useless, anyway; they'd be bound to catch you—and that you don't let mother hear a sound of this."

"I won't! I won't! Judy, get me out of this! Get me out of it! For . . . for mother's sake . . ." (A typical Pat senior plea, that!) "It would break her heart. . . ."

"You might have thought of that earlier," she said, through rather tight lips. "Get to your room now. Don't let father see you. You look such a wreck, he'd be sure to guess something was wrong and tell mother. I've got to think."

When he was safely locked into his room she pulled herself together and went along to the sitting-room. She almost went limp with relief at finding it in darkness. For once, if never before, her father had done the entirely right thing. He'd gone to bed without suspecting that anything unusual had happened. Judith went back to her room and sat down on the edge of her bed suddenly, as if her knees wouldn't bear her a moment longer. She clasped her hands, tight and strained, in her lap. She tried to think, but now her brain, which had been so clear and alert, so

calm and steady, refused to function. It seemed to her that chaos was come again, and that there was no clear path before her in any direction. Her brother was a thief! If her mother should have to know! Suppose there were nothing to be done to prevent a full disclosure? No. She shook that thought from her mind as an utter, unthinkable impossibility. There must be something to be done; some way out. Surely? Surely? Her brother a thief. . . . If her mother should . . . Round and round; up and down; crossing and recrossing; this way and that, useless scraps of thoughts whirled and jostled. . . .

"The end of a perfect day. . . . The end of a perfect day," she found herself saying bitterly. Over and over again she said it with a sort of half-stunned mechanical rhythm. And it had its use, for presently, by its dinning, it brought back a memory of the afternoon, and with it a mental picture of James Barry, and quite suddenly and clearly, something that he had said seemed to go singing through her mind.

" 'It's not so much the life we lead, it's what we bring to it that counts.' "

In a flash she was steadied. The whirl in her brain stilled; the chaos was brought to some degree of order.

"It's what we bring to it . . ." she said to herself in an audible whisper. "Is it? Is there anything I can bring to this?" A moment of perfect quiet and the answer reached her. There was one thing: that courage that he had said was in her eyes. She rose abruptly, crossed to her mirror and looked earnestly into her reflected eyes. Was there really courage in them? Courage enough?

She got no definite answer from her scrutiny, but, none the less, when she drew away after a moment, she felt more peaceful. As she had said to Pat, she had got to think. To think effectively she must keep calm; to think courageously she must *feel* courageous.

She went to bed presently, and lay staring up into the dark. until sheer exhaustion brought sleep to her eyes.

It seemed to her that next day was the most terrible day she had ever had to live through. Pat was in a condition bordering on nervous collapse; she had to watch over him so incessantly that she felt as if she were literally carrying him through the day. Above everything in the world, she dreaded that her mother should get an inkling of what was wrong. And all through the day she was racking her brain; seeking for some way out, and finding nothing; praying for some light in the darkness, and getting no answer to her prayer. She questioned Pat again, hoping that some detail he revealed might point the way, but nothing did. The only result of it was that he became first sullen and then hysterical.

She went to bed on that Sunday night, no nearer to a solution than she had been, and yet, mercifully, she woke on Monday morning with at least the outline of a plan fully graven upon her mind. When it had come to her, she didn't know. It just seemed to be there when she opened her eyes to the morning light.

She got up, slipped into her dressing-gown, and went along quietly to Pat's room. He was asleep, but she woke him gently, with a quiet touch on his shoulder, and a whispered:

"Pat."

He opened heavy eyes, saw her, and sat up with a jerk, his dark hair tousled.

"Yes, what is it?" he asked anxiously.

"I just want to tell you what you're to do, before mother's up," she said in a whisper.

"Judy, you've thought of something? Some plan to save me?" he whispered back eagerly.

"I can't promise anything. I've got a plan—of sorts. But it's only a try, and may be no good. Now, get up as usual, and go out exactly as if you were going to the office."

"Yes."

"Ring up Hood & Jenkins and ask for Mr. Albert Jenkins, and tell him that I'm unavoidably prevented from coming to work this morning."

"What excuse shall I give?"

"Oh, I leave the lie to you."

"*Then* what?"

"Potter round as you like, and meet me at the Cave Café, back of St. Paul's, at twelve."

"Oh, Lord! All that time, not knowing . . ."

"Don't snivel. I've got to give myself time. If I can be earlier, I will. Now, have you got all that?"

"Get up; dress; pretend to go to the office. Ring up Hood & Jenkins, get on to Jenkins, tell him you're not turning up this morning; mooch around till twelve; then go to the Cave. Is that all?"

"Yes," she said, glad to see that his mind seemed clearer than it had been yesterday, and his whole demeanour steadier.

She turned to go, but he caught her arm.

"Jude, what are you going to do?" he asked.

She hesitated a moment; considering whether or

not she should tell him, and decided that perhaps he had better know.

"I'm going to your office to see Victor Jason," she answered him.

"What, the boss?" he cried, looking up at her with half-frightened eyes, as if the mere name were enough to strike terror.

She nodded.

"Yes," she said slowly. "The man you call the cruellest beast alive."

Chapter IV

THE London offices of the Jason Electrical Equipment Company were in Robsart Street, off Holborn. And very fine offices they were too, though not a great deal to look at from outside.

Judith went in through a wide entrance, up three shallow stone steps, pushed through swing doors, and found herself faced with a door marked "Inquiries."

She went in and, as coolly as she could, inquired for Mr. Victor Jason. A girl clerk referred her in an uninterested and impersonal way to a young man, who invited her, with a backward jerk of the head, towards his desk. She went towards him.

"You want to see Mr. Jason?" he asked.

"Yes, please," she answered.

"Have you an appointment?"

"No."

"Mr. Jason never sees anyone without an . . ."

"Perhaps you would send my name up?" broke in Judith. "It's very important."

"To Mr. Jason or to you?" inquired the man with a hint of irony.

"Perhaps to both," she replied gravely.

"Write your business on this slip," said the young man wearily. "I'll send it up."

"Thanks very much." Judith wrote; not her business; just her name. He looked at it.

"Connor," he read aloud. "Any relation of young Pat?"

Judith's heart gave a hop.

"His sister," she said, and raised tense eyes to his face, searching for any sign that Pat's disgrace was known. The man's expression reassured her, for if it changed at all, it was only to brighten to something rather more cordial. He beckoned a girl, and turned back to ask:

"Not ill, is he?"

Judith was saved the necessity of answering the question by the girl coming up. The man spoke to her in a low voice.

"Miss Connor to see the boss. Better get on to Grimwade."

The girl left. He turned back to Judith.

"Can't do more, and I don't hold out any hope whatever. Go along to the waiting-room, will you? First door on the left."

She stopped just to thank him, and to add:

"Do you know my brother well?"

"Oh, rather. Thick as thieves," was his answer, as he bent over his desk again.

Judith went out, her heart pounding. Thick as *thieves!* The hackneyed phrase seemed to pierce her through. She shook herself impatiently. Heart pounding just for three commonplace words! For a hack phrase that she was liable to hear many hundreds of times during the rest of her life! She must pull herself together; get her nerves under control. After all, she had learned one thing from that casual young clerk: the reason of Pat's non-appearance was

not generally known. Comfort and encouragement in that.

She went along to the waiting-room, where, to her relief, she found herself alone. She sat down, and sooner than she had dared to hope the door opened and one of the smallest men she had ever seen came in. He was faultlessly dressed in short black coat, striped trousers, patent boots, and linen of spotless, creaseless white. His face was so thin that Judith had an uncomfortable feeling that she could see right through the meagre covering of flesh sheer to his skull. She rose to meet him, feeling that if there should be hostility to face, she could face it better standing. Then she saw that, in spite of shrewd, habitually pursed-up lips, there was an expression of kindliness in his eyes. That cheered her extraordinarily. His bony, immaculately manicured hand held a broad black ribbon to which gold-rimmed eyeglasses were suspended, and as he approached he set them carefully on his nose, the better, she thought, to observe her.

"Miss Connor?" he asked, with the air of one who knows the question to be unnecessary.

"Yes." Her voice was very low.

"My name is Grimwade. And you are?"

"Patrick Connor's sister," she said steadily.

"Ah, yes. Please sit down, Miss Connor."

Judith sat down in the big chair again. Mr. Grimwade drew a small one nearer, and sat facing her, one dapper knee over the other. His eyes seemed to her to be penetrating into the very workings of her brain.

"You wanted to see Mr. Jason?" he said, after a moment's pause.

"About what?"

"About my brother."

"Ah, yes," said Mr. Grimwade again. "A sorry business, Miss Connor. I am really grieved about it." There was genuine sympathy in that.

"That is very good of you," she said in a low voice.

He coughed behind his hand; took off the gold-rimmed glasses, polished them on a grey silk handkerchief and replaced them on his nose. None of these actions was necessary, but they were habits which he found helped thought along.

"If I may be quite frank," he said, after a silence. "If I may be *quite* frank . . ."

"I should be very grateful if you would be," she broke in earnestly. "My brother has told me—essential details, but I still feel that I am in the dark."

"Then, if I may be quite frank, I want to say, as little brutally as possible, that there is no doubt, no doubt whatever, of your brother's . . ."

"Of his guilt?" she broke in again. "I know that, Mr. Grimwade."

"Ah, you know it?" Mr. Grimwade seemed considerably relieved.

"Yes. He didn't—after the first few moments, at any rate—attempt to hide the fact that he had really taken the money."

"Then it is not to plead his innocence that you wish to see Mr. Jason?"

"No. I know there is no innocence to plead." The grey-green eyes looked very straight, and full of quite unconscious tragedy, into Mr. Grimwade's. Inside Mr. Grimwade's wizened body was a heart as large and soft as any mother's. It cost him an effort to

continue his examination in cold, feelingless tones, after looking into those eyes. But he made the effort and went on.

"I must also point out," he said, "that there is no excuse for your brother's action. He was well paid; was given a position of responsibility and trust; and was treated with the greatest consideration by Mr. Jason. By everyone, I may say, for he was extremely popular. He is a young man, blessed, if I may so express it, with a singularly engaging personality . . ."

"Blessed?" cried Judith, with deep feeling. "I should not say *blessed,* Mr. Grimwade." She drew a breath, and steadied herself with an effort. "I can find no excuse for what he has done. I have tried to find excuses, and simply cannot."

"You are brave, Miss Connor."

Judith's lips twisted to a queer smile.

"That is the second time I have been told that within the last two days. I hope it is true, for it seems to me that life demands courage . . ." She turned away and looked round the room; then suddenly back again at Mr. Grimwade.

"You know, it always astonished me that Pat should be *given* such a responsible post to begin with," she said quickly.

Mr. Grimwade pursed his lips.

"Mr. Jason is a man given to quick likes and dislikes. Your brother charmed him. But that does not mean that he feels inclined to be merciful, now that Connor has proved treacherous. He is not the man to allow his power and authority to be flouted. You had better know that he does *not* feel mercifully disposed towards your brother."

Again the grey-green eyes looked very straightly into Mr. Grimwade's.

"I am not here to ask Mr. Jason for mercy," she said.

Mr. Grimwade coughed again; and again polished his glasses.

"Perhaps," he said, when this was done, "perhaps you had better tell me what you *are* here for?"

"Will you tell *me* something first, Mr. Grimwade?"

"If it is in my power, yes."

"How many, besides yourself and Mr. Jason, know what my brother has done?"

"Not one. I was suspicious; watched for a time, then made a surprise examination of his books. Finding them irregular, I questioned him, and getting no satisfaction from his answers, took him before Mr. Jason. It was all quite privately done."

"*You* are merciful, at least," she said gratefully.

He disclaimed that at once.

"It was not my money that was involved," he said with a touch of dry humour. "And now, what is it that you want to see Mr. Jason for?"

"I have a proposition to put to him."

"Its nature?"

Judith hesitated.

"I should like to explain that to Mr. Jason myself. You see, the whole thing depends upon how I, as an individual, chance to strike him. Whether he feels that I am sincere and to be trusted. It is as business-like a proposition as I am in a position to make."

Mr. Grimwade rose quickly, as if he had suddenly made up his mind.

"I will tell Mr. Jason that you are here," he said.

"You haven't told him yet, then?" exclaimed Judith in surprise.

"No. I thought it best to see you myself first. I am, if I may so express it, Mr. Jason's shock-absorber."

He allowed his shrewd lips to unpucker into a smile, and went out. Scarcely was he outside the room than he returned to say, as if struck by a second thought:

"Come up with me."

She followed him with alacrity, glad to leave the waiting-room. Waiting-rooms always threaten failure. Any little office boy or girl can be sent to get rid of you.

They went up in the lift to the first floor; out here, and along labyrinthine passages. A stretch of thick blue carpet coming to view as they turned a corner, warned Judith that they were approaching Victor Jason's room.

Mr. Grimwade opened a door marked "Mr. Victor Jason" in large letters, and, beneath, in small ones, "Miss Rattray, Secretary."

"Miss Rattray is away with a cold," said Mr. Grimwade in a low voice. "Will you wait here for a moment?" He led the way in and closed the door; indicated a chair, and, when she was seated, he went through another door into Victor Jason's room. And now, for so meticulously careful a man, he did a curiously careless thing. He left that dividing door ever so slightly ajar. Had it been shut Judith could have heard nothing of what was said on the other side of it; open, she heard everything. It was not until afterwards that it occurred to her to wonder

whether little Mr. Grimwade had left the door open on purpose that she might hear, and be forearmed with at least some slight knowledge of the man she was to meet. At the moment she was at too great a tension to do anything but sit, with her hands clasped tightly in her lap, and listen for the voices that would come to her from that room beyond the door.

The first to reach her was a big, rough voice that made her heart sink.

"What the devil's the matter now, Grimwade?" it said impatiently. "What are you tip-toeing about in that pussy-footed way for? It's bad enough to have Ratty away just when there's an extra lot of work on hand. She always does contract her infernal colds at the worst possible moments."

The dry voice of little Mr. Grimwade broke in at that point.

"Miss Connor is here, sir."

Judith waited breathlessly for the reply.

"Connor? Who's Miss Connor?" The tone of that was not encouraging. Judith pressed her clasped hands tightly over her heart.

"Young Pat Connor's sister, sir," she heard Grimwade say.

"Damned young thief! What does *she* want?"

"To see you, she said."

"Well I won't see her." Tighter and tighter pressed Judith's hands over her heart.

Grimwade's mild little voice again:

"If I might advise you, sir, I think I should."

The sound, then, of a desk-top being violently slapped with the flat of a hand; a big, strong hand, by the sound of it.

"If you think I'm going to interview all that thieving young idiot's snivelling female relatives, you're making one of the big mistakes of your career, Grimwade." Something brutal as well as rough in the big voice now.

"I hadn't any such idea, Mr. Jason," Grimwade answered, with a touch of cold dignity. "But sometimes the interests of humanity demand . . ." He broke off, interrupted by a laugh. Judith learned then, as she listened, that a laugh can be the cruellest sound in the world. She had never heard anything just like Victor Jason's. There was a brutal enjoyment in it; and a note of something so terribly like a snarl, that she visualized a quick mental picture of thick, blunt lips drawn back from long, white, animal teeth.

"That's hysteria. Just hysteria. I mustn't . . . I *mustn't* . . ." she said to herself fiercely. Then leaned forward rigidly, as Victor Jason's voice sounded again.

"The interests of humanity better not come around demanding anything of *me,*" he said, the laugh still running through the words. "What a jargon you talk, man!"

Judith leaned forward in an agony of apprehension. Was that the finish? Was Grimwade going to leave it at that?

Grimwade was not. He went on:

"Well, sir, the young man left in very disastrous circumstances; I thought . . ."

"Disastrous?" Victor Jason's voice broke in. "What's three hundred pounds to me?"

"Disastrous to himself, I mean, sir."

"Oh! Lord love you, Grimwade, there are plenty

more of *him*. You could throw two or three dozen of his sort to the wolves every day of the year, and no one would notice the loss."

"Beast . . . beast . . . beast!" Judith's lips were soundlessly forming the word.

"I think their relatives and friends might, sir," came Grimwade's voice. "Young Connor's sister certainly looks as if she noticed."

"What's she like?" broke in Jason.

"She looks exceedingly pale, and tragic."

"Tell her I can't see her. I'm not going to have any hysterical women crying all over my room."

"She doesn't look the crying sort, sir."

"Oh? Well, what sort *does* she look?"

A slight pause while Mr. Grimwade thought. Then, in his slow, judicial way:

"I think *interesting* is the word. Yes, I think interesting describes her. She had a look—of course I am judging on a very hasty scrutiny—but it struck me that she had a look one could only call steadfast; determined; full of purpose . . ."

"One of those darned, modern, masterful women, with thick ankles and a back of the neck shaved to a bristle you could strike matches on," struck in Jason.

"No, sir. Oh no, not at all. Miss Connor is quite, if I may so express it, quite *feminine*. Rather a pretty foot, I happened to notice."

Jason laughed again. But when he spoke there was no further laughter in his voice. There was something that sounded even more ominous.

"Pale, tragic, interesting." The words came slowly, musingly. "Steadfast, determined, feminine,

and a pretty foot! Sounds rather a good recipe. All right, Grimwade, send her up."

Judith was on fire with shamed resentment even while she relaxed and went limp with relief that little Mr. Grimwade had succeeded in his mission.

"Oh, Pat, Pat, to have got me into this fix!" was the silent cry of her heart. But she dropped her straining hands swiftly to her lap again; leaned back; set her face so that it should be as still and as indifferent as she could make it, and waited for Grimwade to come and fetch her.

A moment later, he pushed the door wide and beckoned.

"Mr. Jason will see you now," he said.

Judith rose, and stood for a moment, straight as a column, then went quickly past Grimwade through the doorway into the next room.

Outwardly she was steady, deliberate and cool; the moment was here, and Judith generally managed to meet big moments steadfastly whatever turmoil might be going on in her heart.

She paused, just inside the doorway, standing straight, her head held high, and across the room looked at Victor Jason.

He was sitting behind a wide, flat-topped desk, leaning back in his chair, and the first thing she noticed about him was that he was *not* the fleshy, gross, red-faced, thick-featured, bull-necked creature she had been picturing, as she listened to his voice from the other room. Relief in that, that raised her spirits. A flashing series of impressions came to her as if it were not with her physical eyes that she was seeing him, but with some sense beyond her ken.

First, a sense of enormous physical strength; of overwhelming energy; of masterfulness; ruthlessness; of something sardonic; something sneering; something—she could not tell just what—that made her catch a quick little breath of fear.

Then out of these things intangible, concrete details began to thrust themselves. The immense shoulders of him, slouched slightly forward; the squarish, dark, dominating head; the strange, blackish grey of his eyes; the positive jut of his nose; the clean-cut modelling of his wide, grim mouth that she had pictured as being thick-lipped and loose; the heavy squareness of his jaw; the size and tremendous powerfulness of his hands, too.

Between her entrance into the room and the soft closing of the door behind her all this came to her. Then came the realization of his steady, relentless look upon her, and the sound of his voice again: harsh, unmusical; utterly masculine.

"You're young Connor's sister, I'm told. What do you want to see me about? Make it quick. I'm busy."

The scene that followed was one which Judith never forgot. Almost word for word it carved itself upon her memory, cutting marks that would be unhealed wounds as long as memory lasted.

She gathered all her courage and coolness and made up her mind to face whatever might come.

Across the big room, her eyes met his squarely.

"I came to see you about my brother," she answered, and to her relief her voice was quite steady.

"Well, what about him?" The words came

roughly and the wide lips shut to a line the moment they were spoken.

"About what he has done."

Victor Jason's face was as hard as if it had been cut in granite; those queer, dark, almost opaque grey eyes of his never left her face.

"There's nothing to see me about," he said brusquely. "He's robbed me of three hundred pounds. That's all. There's nothing to see me about on that business."

He had a curious, short, harsh manner of speaking that made Judith feel he threw his meaning at her rather than spoke it; threw it with deliberate and cool aim, and watched to see it hit and sting her. She decided that he should watch for that in vain, and went on determinedly:

"I know that he has robbed you, Mr. Jason," she said. "I'm not dreaming of disputing it, or of making any sort of excuse for him. You gave him a splendid post, treated him with every confidence, and he has repaid you by—robbing you of three hundred pounds."

She had a telling voice, and now earnestness lent it a note that was positively impressive. But Victor Jason was apparently quite unimpressed.

"You've got the details as pat as I have," he returned. "What do you want to come here wasting my time for?"

"I thought perhaps you would tell me what you intend to do about him?"

He answered immediately.

"That's easy: and it will be done this afternoon. I shall take out a warrant for his arrest."

Judith's hands clenched for a moment, but she faced up to the situation squarely. She stood still and staunch, her eyes unflinchingly meeting his.

"That will mean—prison," she said.

"And the best place for him and all his type," retorted Jason.

"There is no other way?"

"None."

"You have made up your mind?"

"Quite."

With nearly the full length of a big room between them, he made of talking a sort of conversational ball game, hurling the ball with brutal relentlessness at her: while she, keeping a tight hand upon emotion, tossed it quietly back to him.

"Suppose," she said slowly—"suppose I could suggest an alternative?"

"There is no alternative."

"If I could suggest one, would you listen?" she persisted.

He sat still, looking at her for a moment; then with a sudden movement pulled open a drawer of his desk and took out a folded paper.

"You'd recognize your brother's writing if you saw it, I suppose?" he said.

She knew what that paper was, and had a feeling that her heart turned completely over. But still she showed no outward sign of any such feeling.

"His confession?" she asked, and those two words were as much as she could persuade her lips to utter, just at that moment.

"So he told you, did he?"

"Yes, he told me."

"And in face of that, do you think there is any alternative?"

"There is still an alternative," she said steadily.

The invisible ball came smashing back at her.

"With this in my possession do you imagine that I will let there be any alternative?"

It took a moment or two for the revelation in that to dawn upon her understanding. When it did she drew a quick breath, and the words: "the cruellest beast alive" went cutting through her mind. She had thought that was Pat's exaggeration, due to nerves. She had tried not to think of it as being even possible. But Victor Jason was revealing that it was not only possible, but true. She remembered what she had heard him say contemptuously to Grimwade: that three hundred pounds was nothing to him. . . . Of course it wasn't! Of course! Of course! Why *should* three hundred pounds mean anything to him, with all his money? It meant nothing; the fact that he had been robbed meant nothing. What *did* mean anything to him, then?

What did he want? Just to be cruel? Just to smash Pat? Just to break his life for him? For the devilish fun of it! She was appalled by the thought; for what, *what* appeal was there to make to a man actuated by such a motive? She felt that the plans she had been formulating broke around her.

His next words appalled her further: they were such a confirmation of these thoughts. Without moving, he said:

"I've got that young brother of yours *here*." He opened one big hand slowly, so that the full size and strength of it was nakedly displayed, and closed it

again, in a terribly significant way. "Do you imagine I'll let him *go?*"

The very slightness of the gesture added to the effect of it; made of him something that seemed not quite human. If he would clench his fists, rage and shout about the loss of his money, curse Pat for a thief or show himself in any smallest way to be a mere man and not a thing of granite implacability! But that was all he did. Just opened his hand and closed it again.

She suddenly wanted to shriek. The tension of the last two days seemed all at once to reach snapping point. The cruellest beast alive! The cruellest beast alive! The words went seething through her brain. And they were true. Terribly true. He just wanted to *hurt;* just wanted to torture; for the sheer joy of seeing his victim writhe.

"Do you imagine that I'll let him go?" he repeated.

She came out of the horror of her thoughts with a start. There was sheer desperation in her heart as she answered, faltering:

"You might, if you considered my alternative worth it."

"I have told you there is no alternative."

Her strength broke then, shivered against his stony immovability, and the desperation was in her voice, shattering it, as she cried out:

"Surely, surely, there is something more worth while than the utter ruin of . . . of a weak boy!" She called down curses upon her own head even as the words left her shaking lips. To break down and show her fear and desperation was the one thing she

had vowed she would not do. The one thing she had steeled herself to avoid. She stood like a stricken thing waiting for the hurling back of the invisible ball; for a moment, just standing, as if she were prepared to let it hit her; even closing her eyes against it, as if she knew she were powerless to defend herself. It came: smashing at her, with all the force of his laugh—that ominous sound she had already heard —behind it.

"And *this,*" he said, "this is where the grand whine begins, I suppose. This is where you go down on your knees and grovel?"

The effect of that upon her was electrical. Everything in her rose in rebellion. Her fighting instinct; self-scorn; outraged vanity, all helped. Her eyes were open now, and flashing; her poise was suddenly straight and proud. If her prayer for strength had received direct answer from heaven, it could not have been more effective than those crushingly contemptuous words of his.

"I haven't come here to whine, Mr. Jason," she said, her voice low and very clear. "And I shall neither grovel nor go down upon my knees." She stopped speaking abruptly, but the room seemed to ring with her words and the clear, challenging tone of her voice.

That brought the climax of the interview, for which she was so utterly unprepared, smashing down upon her. For a while he said nothing; just sat back in his chair and looked at her; his face set and unreadable. But some change was evidently working in him, for there came a gleam of something new in his dark eyes; and suddenly his huge shoulders jerked for-

ward, he struck the desk with the flat of his hand, and said slowly, evenly, letting the words fall clear and ominous:

"*Won't* you? You damn well will if I choose to make you!"

Chapter V

For a moment the effect of this upon Judith was stunning. Then a wave of furious resentment surged over her. Her pale face crimsoned; her eyes fairly blazed. Words beat against her lips clamouring for utterance; words of rage; words of scorn; words of detestation. But suddenly through the red veil of anger before her eyes she saw that gleam of something new in his; saw that he was sitting forward tense and rigid, his big hand still spread flat upon the desk. Suddenly through the tumultuous throbbing of her pulses she heard the sound of his hard breathing. And abruptly as it had swept over her, just so abruptly the wave of feeling receded; the clamour of words died unspoken, a tangle upon her tongue, and she came up from the dark confusion of anger into the light of reason, realizing that, in some way, the whole situation between them had changed. The very atmosphere of the room seemed different. But how? Why? She passed a shaking hand across her eyes, endeavouring to understand. For a moment her brain could only echo and re-echo his words: "You damn well will, if I choose to make you!"

She would? What had *she* done? *She* had not stolen the money. *She* had signed no confession. The shadow of prison did not hang, black and threatening, over *her*. . . . How could he make her . . . ?

She looked at him searchingly, but could not reason it out. It came to her, though, that he was no longer concerned with Pat; that the full force of his attention had become riveted suddenly upon herself. What did that mean? The full force of his cruelty, too? The full force of his desire to torture, and his delight in watching suffering?

So the thoughts and surmises jagged their way through her brain and left her sure of nothing, except that in a single moment everything had changed.

He snapped the tension between them by leaning back, drawing his big hand over the desk-top as he did so, until it rested on the edge. Then:

"Come here," he said. His voice was different, too; quiet, almost soft; the bully gone from it and in its place a note of absolute command. He spoke as one who has a situation in the hollow of his hand and knows it.

With her eyes never leaving his, Judith crossed the room until the distance between them was no greater than could be measured by the width of the desk.

"Sit down." Again that commanding tone. He made no movement; not even the smallest gesture of a hand.

Judith obeyed in silence, conscious that his eyes were upon her.

"Now tell me of your alternative," he said.

She had to swallow before she could produce a voice from her dry throat.

"I was going to . . . to suggest," she began, and paused to moisten lips that felt inflexible, unwilling.

"Yes?" Still quite quiet, that hitherto rough voice of his; quite quiet; very nearly *kind*. And still un-

moving that dark, forward-thrust head of his, and the big hand on the edge of the desk.

Judith drew a breath and steadied herself with an effort. She begun again, on a different line.

"It is no good my offering merely to repay the money that my brother has taken, Mr. Jason; it would . . ."

"Stolen," he broke in, correcting her. "That your brother has stolen, Miss Connor."

"Yes, stolen," she agreed, steadily, conscious still of that unwavering look of his. "It would be futile to suggest only that," she went on, gathering her courage resolutely, "because the instalments I could afford would be so small, and the length of time it would take, so great."

"Exactly. Well?" He questioned and waited, unmoving.

"My plan was this," she said, suddenly rushing the situation. "That you should allow me to take my brother's place, here in your office, with you. That you should pay me the salary you paid him, and stop a certain amount of it each week until the three hundred pounds, plus ten per cent., is paid off." She stopped speaking, and watched him with strained, anxious eyes; waiting for him to pronounce his judgment upon her scheme.

For a time he said nothing; remained looking at her as before. Then he said:

"What did I pay your brother?"

She was greatly relieved at the tone of the question. At least it was not condemning.

"Three-ten," she answered.

"Three-ten, eh? And how much of that do you propose I shall keep each week?"

"Ten shillings?" she suggested, making it a question.

"Three hundred pounds at ten shillings a week," he said, calculating the obvious sum with unnecessary deliberation. "Six hundred weeks; rather a long time, as you yourself suggested. Add to that ten per cent. interest, and . . ."

She leaned forward quickly.

"A pound then," she broke in. "Even at that rate it will take a long time. I realize that. But I will be working for you, all the while. It is the kind of work I am accustomed to; and I am good at it. I am, really. My work will be of *some* value."

"Will it?" he sent back, with blunt indifference. "What guarantee have I of that? The sister of a thief, that's about all I know of you."

She coloured hotly, and drew back sharply, but her answer came with dignity, and showed no smallest trace of resentment. She said quietly:

"I have been with my present employers for seven years," and let it go at that.

"Who are they?" he asked.

"Hood & Jenkins; the office equipment people, in Norgate Street."

He nodded.

"I got this desk from them," he said laconically, by way of intimating that he knew the firm. "And your exact position with them has been . . . ?"

"For the last three years—secretary to Mr. Albert Jenkins," she replied.

"Good at figures?"

"Yes."

"You share that talent with your brother, then; he was remarkably bright along that line."

She could not be sure whether there was insulting sarcasm in that or not. She said again:

"Yes," and left it so.

There was a moment's silence. Then:

"What did they pay you?" he asked.

"Four pounds," she answered at once.

"Oh? Then you'll be dropping ten shillings if you come to me?"

Yet again she said an unadorned "Yes."

It was a full minute before he spoke. Then he said:

"So that is your alternative?"

"That," she answered, "is my alternative."

"In return for your entirely unproven services, and the privilege of waiting some twelve years or so for the money your brother stole from me."

She interrupted him by drawing an audible breath. Put starkly, as he put it; measured, as he was measuring it, solely by the yard-stick of time and money, her plan seemed to dwindle suddenly to a very small and hopeless thing. But she had heard Victor Jason tell Grimwade that the money was nothing to him, so she went on hopefully:

"Take more money each week, then," she suggested earnestly. "I said a pound, you know; that makes the time only six years; not twelve. Take *more* than a pound . . ."

He broke in.

"You interrupted me," he said. "I was going to ask you, if you had listened, exactly what you expected from me, in return for the—offer—you make?" The

emphasis on the word "offer" made of the offer itself a still poorer and more contemptible thing.

"Oh, I'm sorry; I misunderstood," she said quickly.

"Well?" The question came sharply, and their eyes met.

"I want you in return to drop this business about Pat. I want you *not* to take out a warrant against him. I want you *not* to—send him to prison." Again she caught a breath. She had launched that poor little scheme of hers to the last detail now, and waited tensely for his answer. When it came, it took her completely by surprise. He shrugged his big slouched shoulders and said:

"Oh, that? That's ancient history. I am no longer interested in sending that boy to prison. You are going to save him."

Judith said an "oh" of amazement. But she did not stop to think the thing out. She only knew that her heart was suddenly singing in her breast. He was going to let Pat off! She had accomplished that which she had set out to do. This man was not such a cruel beast, after all. She rose, stammering out thanks; ready, almost, to go down on her knees now, as he had said he could make her; not to grovel, but to bless him.

But he, looking up at her from under dark brows, silenced the song in her heart and scattered the gratitude that was faltering from her lips.

"Sit down; you haven't saved him yet," he said bluntly.

She stared blankly for a moment, rather as if he

had hit her in the face and she were trying to recover from it.

"But . . . but you said . . ." she began.

"I know what I said," he broke in. "Sit down."

She obeyed, limply.

He scanned her face with dark, steady eyes. If he saw that she was pale with anxiety and that her eyes were wide and tortured with the strain of waiting and wondering what was to come next, the sight did nothing to make him put a quick, merciful finish to the scene. He kept her waiting further, while he asked:

"You keep your family going, I suppose?"

"More or less—yes," she agreed.

"What makes you?"

"I *have* to. There's no one else to do it. You have seen what Pat is."

"But why bother?"

"They are my family," she explained simply. "He is my brother."

"Is that a reason?"

"It is, to me."

"Learn this, at all events," he said brusquely. "That the money is nothing to me."

She felt that she had known that from the first.

"That is why I have asked you to let me pay back the other things that are owing to you as well," she answered.

His eyes narrowed slightly and he looked his question before he spoke it.

"What else is owing to me, then?"

"Service and loyalty."

"Service? Loyalty?" he repeated.

She nodded.

"My brother robbed you of both those when he robbed you of your money. I recognize that. I do indeed. Is it those things that count with you, since the money does not?"

"I've long ago ceased to believe that they exist, except as commodities to be bought," he answered with a laugh. "No, Miss Connor, service and loyalty do not count with me."

Again their eyes met. She was moved by a sudden impulse to say what was in her mind, without thought; without calculation. To be honest with this big, sullen, brutal man, whose mind she could not read and whose motives she could only wildly guess at. Honesty, complete and transparent as the day, could, after all, put her in no more difficult plight than the plight she was already in, and since reason had failed her all along the line, it would be easier to be simply honest than to try to be wise and politic. She leaned forward, speaking quickly.

"Then what *does!*" she cried imploringly. "Let me understand . . . what *does?*"

He answered with a single word, giving honesty for honesty:

"Power."

She looked at him, startled. He remained unmoving.

"Power?" she echoed on a note of question. "But what power can this wretched business give you? A thing that has happened a thousand times before and will happen a thousand times again! A miserable, hateful commonplace! What power *can* it give you?"

"The biggest power of all," he told her. "Power

over another life. Power to make it; mould it to one's own design. There's the power of fate in that; the power of destiny. With that power, one becomes the brother and playfellow of—whatever gods there be!" There was fervour in his voice as he said this; and a curious kindling of warmth came into his thunderous grey eyes. The look between them held during a moment of tingling silence. Her heart was beating hard, and she knew that she was on the verge of revelation; that with the passing of the next few moments, the speaking of the next few words, full understanding would be hers.

"Power over a life," she said, and moistened her lips before adding, "*Whose* . . . life?"

Again the big shoulders jerked forward and the big hand came, palm down, on to the desk-top. Again he answered with a single word.

"Yours."

The words seemed to hang in the air to remind Judith that it was no mere sound of her fancy, but a word that had been spoken, bringing into everyday life, as she knew it, something fantastic, unbelievable. This went beyond simple cruelty; beyond the stark desire to see a victim writhe. Again, it seemed to her that the very atmosphere of the room was changed.

"Are you . . . are you *serious,* Mr. Jason?" she asked at last, the question coming blurtingly.

"Serious? Why shouldn't I be?"

"Only that I didn't know that things like this . . . could be *real.* I didn't know that such impulses moved . . . civilized men."

"I'm a savage, then; eh?" he asked with a laugh.

A quick memory of James Barry went ripping

through her mind. The line between civilized man and the savage. He had argued that it was broken through at innumerable points; some almost invisible; some glaringly apparent. How lightly and pleasantly they had talked of it! But now, had the question been brought suddenly near to her? Was she standing at one of the breaking points, where modern and primitive merged?

"I don't know how to answer you," she said haltingly. "I'm—confused. I can't see why it should interest you to have power over a life like mine. I'm nothing to you. You don't know me. *Can* have no interest in me."

He laughed again, shortly.

"Have you never thought what fun it might be to have the power to order another life, even down to its most minute details?" he said, and now his tone was conversational; almost friendly.

She shook her head.

"To be able," he went on, "to ordain what another person shall do? To be able to decide that he shall do this thing and not that? If he says that he's going to buy his gloves in Oxford Street, to tell him, no, he'll buy them in Bond Street, and to have the power to make him obey? Or if he says muffins for tea, to insist on crumpets? If he wants to walk, to make him run or hop or jump as the fancy takes you? Hasn't it ever occurred to you what fun you could get out of having such power?" He was smiling as he said all this, and seemed now to be in high spirits. There was an unexpected attractiveness in his smile; it came with such a flash of the whitest teeth Judith ever remembered seeing. His laugh had been an omi-

nous, unlaughing sound. But his smile lit his face, even to his queer, sombre eyes, with a radiance that made her hope that his words were more or less fooling. She smiled in response, a shade uncertainly, and said:

"No, I can't see much fun in any of that. What does it matter where anybody buys their gloves—unless you happen to be in the glove business, of course." Her own little touch of humour came tentatively; he acknowledged it with a quick nod.

"It *doesn't* matter," he agreed at once. "You miss the point. The thing that *does* matter is that you have the power to compel him to buy his gloves where *you* say he shall. To compel him to mess up his digestion with crumpets and not with muffins. To compel him to hop or jump, no matter how much he wants merely to walk."

"But these are all such little things," she objected.

"Not when you use them as illustrations of power."

"It's so *small* to want to. What have the insignificant details of another person's life to do with you? How are they your business?"

"These things cease to be insignificant details and become little stinging whips with which to test one's power; with which to keep it in working order. Can't you see that?"

She couldn't quite. It was all too unusual; too out of the way. Her everyday life had taught no precedents for fantastic stuff like this. She shook her head.

"You will," he said shortly, and the prophecy seemed to her to hold a threat. But he was still smiling and so she still nursed her hopes that he was not wholly serious; that he was talking for effect.

"Power doesn't stop at the details," he went on after a moment. "Life is made up of so many things. Some small, some great. Power holds them all in thrall. Power can say: 'You shall do this work and not that; you shall have these friends and not those; this man shall be your love, and no other.' Work, friendships, loves, are all big things in a life, and power holds them all."

No fooling here, thought Judith; and after all, her hope of it had been a half-hearted thing—this was all earnest, in spite of the wildness of it. But, of course, there was no truth in it. There *couldn't* be. No one could have such power over another life, it would be against fairness; against nature. Against God; impious. . . . All the same, she started to her feet, sudden panic assailing her.

"It's impossible!" she cried. "It's just *talk* . . . and silly talk too. Bad, godless talk. I won't listen . . . I'll . . ." She turned and made for the door, a wild desire for freedom beating in her heart—a desire for the outside, ordinary world of business rush and hurry; a desire for things normal and understandable.

"Come back." His voice commanding her.

But she went on.

"Come back." His voice again.

Near the door she turned and flung low-voiced, tremulous defiance at him.

"I won't come back. I'm going. I'll never come into this room again! You can't work your silly power over me! It's just an idea; a mad idea. But you can't work it on me. I'll show you that. You tell me to come back. Well, I won't come back. Do you understand?"

The words were tumbling from her shaking lips, a queer, breathless force behind them.

"I understand this," he rapped out. "You begin work here to-morrow morning at ten—*sharp.*"

"I don't. I'll not work for you. I take back my offer. I wouldn't work for you for a thousand a week! You talk of power . . . but you have none over me. None over me!" She caught a breath and was turning swiftly towards the door again when she saw his big hand go to a drawer of his desk. She stopped short and stood stone still. Her very heart seemed to stand still, too, while she watched him pull the drawer open and take out a paper. He said nothing, but there was a deadly significance in his every movement. Pat's confession. . . .

It seemed then that the sum of all the agony of every creature in existence which has ever known what it means to be trapped, was driven deep into her soul.

"Come back." His voice, a third time, commanding her.

She came back.

When she stood once more by the desk, he raised his face and looked at her. He was smiling still, but something had happened to the charm of his smile now. The radiance of it was gone. His eyes were no longer lit with humour; they were dark again; dark, keen and watchful.

"It's just talk, is it? *Is* it?" he demanded.

She shook her head.

"No." Her voice was almost soundless.

"Just an idea; a mad idea? *Is* it?"

"No."

"And I can't work my silly power over you? *Can't* I?" The bullying catechism went on.

"You can. . . . Oh, you can, for the time, at least."

"You won't work for me. *Won't* you?"

"I will. I . . . *must;* if you say so. I can't see any other way!"

"There *is* no other way; I'm glad you've woke up to that." He dropped the bullying tone as he added: "You begin to-morrow, then."

"What am I to say to my present chief? What reason am I to give for—deserting him?"

"Oh, anything you like: health; better job; desire for change."

"Suppose I tell him the truth!" she suggested slowly. "Suppose I tell him that you are—forcing me to leave him? Holding Pat's confession over me?"

"Of course, if you wish your brother's little—lapse, shall we call it?—to be generally known . . ." He left it there, and added: "But I should advise against it. I should really." His tone was pleasantly conversational, but it rang with meaning.

"I see," she said.

"I'm glad you do," he replied. "Shall we call the whole matter settled, then?"

"Since there is no other way—yes."

He reached his hands towards a bell-push near his desk.

"Grimwade will initiate you into your duties here, and fix up details." He rang the bell.

She leaned across the desk suddenly, and said in a low, hurried voice:

"Tell me what it is to mean. I'm all confused and

at a loss. Tell me what you are going to demand of me. Is it . . . to be the . . . the usual thing?"

He looked up, meeting her eyes squarely. A smile was on his lips again; the smile with the charm to it.

"Either you under-rate my sense of originality or you over-rate your own attractions," he said bluntly.

She drew back, her face crimsoning, and then laughed suddenly; a short, shaken sound that held none of the essential elements of laughter.

"You have at least been frank with me," she said. "You have at least shown your hand . . ."

"Why shouldn't I?" he asked. "I can afford to; I have it, you see."

"It?" she questioned.

"The power," he replied. "Ah, Grimwade"—this as the dapper little man made his pussy-footed entrance. "Miss Connor is taking her brother's place with us; take her and let her into all the secrets, will you?" He looked from Grimwade to Judith. His tone was faultlessly conventional, but his dark eyes held their message.

"She starts with us to-morrow," he finished.

Chapter VI

JUDITH had an odd feeling, when she was once more out in the busy street, that she had stepped out of a world of fantastic unreality into the ordinary, every-day world she knew. She drew a deep breath of sheer relief at being here among work-a-day men and women again; at having left behind—for a time at least—that strange, dark-eyed, cruel-mouthed man, who spoke of power as if he were some sort of fate. Out in the clean light of day, it seemed as if her interview with him could not really have happened. Things like that *didn't* happen. Girls weren't trapped into a man's service by these fantastic means. It *couldn't* happen. Something would crop up to prevent it. As she hurried along, she gathered up little scraps of ideas and possibilities, trying rather desperately to patch them together.

Pat would discover some new and surprising strength; or Hood & Jenkins would suspect that something was wrong—although with Victor Jason's threat ringing in her ears, she would not dare directly to tell them anything—and would set about in some way which she couldn't guess at, to help her out of the trap she was caught in. It was incredible that Victor Jason, simply because he *was* Victor Jason, should be allowed to exert the power he claimed, unchecked. It was not to-morrow yet; anything might happen in the hours that still remained.

The first of these rather fevered hopes proved its forlornness with her first few words with Pat when she joined him at the Cave tearooms. He was jumpy with nerves; listened impatiently to her account of what she had been able to do, and was filled with peevish discontent that she had not done more. He had impractically pictured her coming to him with his confession in her hands and a story of triumph upon her tongue. Instead she told this unspectacular tale of taking his place and paying back the money he had stolen. Nothing quick, fine and final in that. A dragged out salvation that carried menace beside it. Pat, in short, was not as grateful as he might have been, but then gratitude was not Pat's long suit. She allowed it to pass; only imposed one condition: that upon no account and upon no occasion was he to let their mother suspect anything of what had happened.

Leaving Pat, she went straight to see Albert Jenkins at his office. There was just time to catch him before lunch. She would tell him that she was leaving him at once; and surely he *must* see that something was wrong. Yes, there was real hope in Albert Jenkins. She hurried; turned into the doorway of Messrs. Hood & Jenkins.

A quarter of an hour later she was out in the street again, looking blankly hopeless; rather as if she had been hit; suddenly; unexpectedly. Which is much what had happened. Albert Jenkins had a rather celebratedly quick temper. He had spoken of broken contracts; disloyalty; ingratitude; utter carelessness of his convenience. And she, with the memory of Jason's big hand going towards that drawer in his desk where Pat's confession lay, could only stand, her eyes full

of tears, her face paper-white, and let him say what he chose. If only she could have told him the full truth! But she had not dared to risk it. Power was power, after all. That thought made her shiver slightly, as if the day were cold instead of almost unbearably hot.

To-morrow did not seem so many hours away now; she could fix no hopes, however forlorn, upon any one definite person or object.

When she was in bed that night, oppressed to the depths by fears, utterly unable to sleep, the thought came to her:

"If only I knew where to find James Barry!" James Barry could have helped; she was sure of that. *Would* have helped—surer still of that. What a fool she had been to let him go away, out into the wilds, out of her life, leaving her no means of communicating with him! With no provision of any future meeting except that crazy engagement to meet again in the rose garden, a year hence! If only she could write to him. But she knew of no address that would find him. He had no home in England; no ties here. "James Barry, Somewhere in the World!" was as near as she could get, and as a superscription that was vague, to say the best of it. If only . . . But what was the use of wishing? Thinking of what might have been, what she might have done? Here she was, with to-morrow almost upon her, and she was alone.

Where does courage come from? If Judith had stopped to ask the question, she couldn't have answered it. Yet next morning she was full of courage and rose calm and resolute, to face what the day was to bring. She managed it all as she had planned,

without letting either her mother or father know of the alteration in her work. Pat went to town with her, morosely demanding what she thought he was going to do.

"Go the rounds and see if you can tumble into some sort of job," she advised as she parted with him to make her way along to Robsart Street.

As she passed through the entrance of the big Jason building, the young man in the Inquiries Office beckoned her and said:

"Morning, Miss Connor. Mr. Grimwade left word that you were to go up to him as soon as you got here."

She thanked him and moved away.

"Joining this happy band of brothers I understand?" he added facetiously.

She smiled over her shoulder, and went up to Grimwade's office, which was opposite to Victor Jason's.

Grimwade had just arrived and was looking through his morning's letters when she went in. He turned and greeted her with kind cordiality.

"Good morning, Miss Connor. How are you?"

"Fine, thank you, Mr. Grimwade," she replied steadily.

"Excellent. Now I thought I'd like to take you along myself, and introduce you to Miss Rattray. You will be working under her."

"It's very kind of you."

"Not at all; not at all. Come along." The dapper little man led the way out into the corridor, to the door on the other side that was marked with Miss Rattray's name. He went into the room, with Judith at his heels.

"Here is Miss Connor," he said. "Young Pat's sister. She will be taking young Pat's place more or less, except that she will be working in your rooms instead of in mine." Mr. Grimwade's voice held a cheery tone that suggested that he was trying to inspire a spirit of kindliness in a notably unpromising bosom. Judith was grateful to him, but looking at Miss Rattray, she felt that his effort was bound to be a failure.

Miss Rattray was a small woman, no longer young; sharp-faced; sandy-haired and sallow. Her cold was evidently still heavy upon her, for her light, suspicious eyes were puffy, and much friction had worn her thin nostrils to a state of red translucency. She looked at Judith in a chillingly summing up way. Judith met the look pluckily, but it left her definitely discouraged. She smiled, but Miss Rattray did not unbend.

"Cold, hard, unfeeling," were the words that Judith applied to her within her own mind.

Miss Rattray, as soon as Grimwade had left them, proceeded to tell Judith just what her work would be, without trimming of any sort, and then took her into an outer office where she would work. Miss Rattray's room lay between Victor Jason's on one side and this room on the other. Here were three girls, two talking closely together in whispers and the third quietly preparing her desk for the day. The two girls darted apart on hearing Miss Rattray's voice, and Judith was aware of an atmosphere of interest as she appeared. The girls looked at her as Miss Rattray introduced her, and there was meaning in their looks. The news that young Pat Connor had

left and that his place was to be taken by his sister had caused quite an early-morning flutter.

Miss Angela Brown, a sharp, brassy blonde, had been voicing the opinion—in a whisper—that something very queer was up; and Miss Florence Paskey, a sentimental brunette, also in whispers, had been agreeing. Only Maud Taylor, Miss Rattray's second-in-command, and a quiet, aloof girl, had suspended judgment and kept her tongue still.

Judith was tinglingly aware of the interest at once; aware, too, that she had already been the subject of question and discussion, but she quietly took her place at the flat-topped desk Miss Taylor pointed out to her, and settled down at once to work. The eyes of Miss Brown and Miss Paskey met significantly behind her back.

The work was easy to Judith; it was of the kind she was thoroughly accustomed to, and she dropped into it easily. The thing that chiefly worried her was a fear of being called to Victor Jason's room. However, the morning slid away and she didn't even see him. At lunch time Miss Paskey broke the ice with:

"Your brother got another billet, Miss Connor?"

Judith, still at her typewriter, bent lower as she answered:

"Yes." Lying didn't come easily to Judith.

"Sudden, wasn't it?"

"Very."

"Still, you never know what'll happen in business, do you?"

Miss Taylor was in Miss Rattray's room, which always made conversation rather easier.

"No," Judith agreed.

"You've met the chief, I s'pose?" put in Miss Brown, rising from her desk, and shoving aside a heap of unanswered correspondence.

"Oh, yes," answered Judith.

"Did he engage you? Or was it Grimmy?"

"No; *he* engaged me."

"Isn't he lovely?" sighed Miss Paskey.

Judith looked up, startled.

"Who?"

"V.J. of course. I think he's an ideal man, don't you?"

"Ideal?" She laughed shortly. "That's putting it rather high, isn't it?" She tried hard to keep her tone light and conversational.

"Oh, I think he's wonderful! So big and strong. And his eyes seem to say he'd eat you as soon as look at you. Anything he wants he gets. That's what I *call* a man."

"Oh, dry up, Paskey," put in Miss Brown, and turned to Judith.

"Once she gets started on V.J. there's no stopping her. But any man could wipe his boots on her, and she'd thank him for it. Soft, I call it."

"You know you're crazy about him yourself," retorted Miss Paskey. "Only you haven't the common honesty to admit it."

A wordy duel glinted between the two of them for a minute or two, while Judith listened in amazement. These two girls adored Victor Jason! Admired him; were thrilled by him! Thought him strong, and wonderful. Angela Brown was no less under his thrall, in spite of her expressed scorn for Miss Paskey, than

that wordy young woman herself. Couldn't they see the brutality of him? The cruelty of his mouth? The ruthlessness of those thunderous eyes of his?

"Oh well, dearie," Miss Paskey's voice broke through her thoughts. "We won't row about him. I guess there's not a woman in the building who isn't in the same boat with us, from Ratty down to the messenger girls." She lowered her voice as the disrespectful nickname left her lips. "Your young brother was a fascinating chap, too, in his way, Miss Connor."

"Lots of people have said so," answered Judith.

"Of course *you* don't see it. That's just like a sister. But he was quite a pet with the girls here. There's lots that'll miss him. Ready, Brown? Come on then, my tummy feels like it's nose-bag time."

They left to go to lunch, with no suggestion that Judith should go with them. They weren't sure quite how to take Judith; while they badly wanted to probe the mystery of her presence at Victor Jason's, they had an uncomfortable feeling that she wasn't going to be a mixer. And any girl who wasn't a mixer made lunch a perfect misery.

Judith went by herself to an obscure little tea-shop and had the minimum of food that can possibly be given the name of "lunch."

Her fears that she would be called to Jason's room proved quite unfounded. Friday came, and she hadn't caught so much as the smallest glimpse of him, though she had heard his rough voice saying sharp things to Miss Rattray. She couldn't understand Miss Rattray; the little faded, sharp-faced woman was always

so cold, self-possessed, competent; there wasn't a bend in her anywhere. She was like a spikey little icicle going about the office.

"How does one get on the right side of Miss Rattray?" Judith asked the loquacious Paskey on Friday morning. She had a reason for wanting to know, as she had that first instalment of her debt to pay to Victor Jason, and didn't quite know how she was going to do it without causing a lot of comment.

"One doesn't," replied Florence laconically. "For why? Because she hasn't one."

"Oh," said Judith rather blankly. The prospect ahead wasn't made prettier by this theory of Miss Paskey's.

Miss Paskey lowered her voice:

"She's been here with V.J. for donkey's years. Fourteen or fifteen, I think. And *we* all say she knows where his baby's buried." Miss Paskey settled her dark permanent wave with a highly manicured hand. "Mean to say that an ugly little woman like her could hold down a job like secretary to V.J. all those years if she hadn't influence? Stands to reason."

"She's competent," suggested Judith.

"So's lots of better-looking females."

"He may be used to her ways and not care to change. Lots of men are like that when it comes to a question of secretaries."

"Well, if you think you've got a better clue to it than *we* have, go follow it. Perhaps you know V.J. better than we do?" Miss Paskey's tone was meaningly sweet.

Judith coloured and dropped the topic. The question of seeing Jason that day, however, didn't arise,

as by the time she received her pay envelope he had left the office.

On Saturday morning she screwed her courage to sticking point and bearded Miss Rattray in her room. Miss Rattray, at her desk, looked up in her quick way. Her aspect was not encouraging.

"Well?" The single word was a challenge rather than a question.

"I wanted to see Mr. Jason, please, Miss Rattray," said Judith, and found that her heart was thumping hard.

"What for?" Challenge again, and a quick, shrewd look in the pale eyes.

"There is something I wish to say to him."

"Tell me your business and I'll find out if he'll see you."

"I can't do that."

"You can't? Why not?"

"I just—can't."

Their eyes met; Judith's dark and unhappy; Miss Rattray's pale and suspicious.

"Then I'm afraid I can't bother him about it," said Miss Rattray, her thin lips shutting to a line. There was something hostile about her. But why should she be hostile? What had Judith done to *her?*

"It is very important," Judith said, a plea in her voice now.

"Perhaps; but Mr. Jason never sees anyone without knowing their business first."

Judith stood silent a moment. Then said:

"Then you won't let him know that I want to see him?"

"It is against Mr. Jason's rule."

Judith turned away, troubled. For a moment she felt rather baffled. Then an idea struck her.

"I'm sorry to have bothered you, Miss Rattray. Perhaps Mr. Grimwade could manage it for me."

Miss Rattray's sallow cheeks flamed, and for the first time Judith saw a flicker of uncertainty in the pale eyes. She had managed to strike a spark, at least. She moved on towards the door.

Miss Rattray called her back.

"It is against Mr. Jason's rule, and it will be useless, but I will ask him if he will see you. Wait here." The words fell like so many knives.

Judith waited while Miss Rattray went into Jason's room. She returned almost at once, her face crimson, her eyes flashing.

"You can go in," she said, and there was positively a shake of suppressed feeling in the words.

Ratty with her voice unsteady! Ratty with her cold eyes all on fire.

"She isn't cold. She isn't hard. . . . She's just a . . . a sort of furnace within. All burning up." The revelation came to Judith in the flash of time that it took to say thank you and to go to Jason's door. For a moment she was confused by it, but when she stood before Jason, looking across the big desk into his dark face, all thought of Ratty faded. He was looking through some papers and didn't raise his eyes.

"I want to make my first payment," she heard herself saying, and it seemed that her voice came from a distance and didn't really belong to her.

"Make it then and be quick," he answered her bluntly, still without looking up.

Her hands shook a little as she pulled the money out of her bag and laid it on the desk before him. He didn't touch it; nor did he say anything. He just reached for a receipt book, made out a receipt, tore it out and shoved it across to her. As distant, business-like and impersonal as if she had been transacting an ordinary business deal with him. He seemed busy, preoccupied, anxious only to conclude the matter with her as speedily as possible.

She picked up the slip of paper, folded it and put it in her purse. And thanked him, but he didn't seem to hear. She turned and left him, with nothing more said; going out by the corridor door—a door that was kept strictly for exits and through which one attempted to enter only at one's own peril—with that feeling of limpness that comes from sheer relief. The moment she had been dreading had petered out to nothing very dreadful after all. Here was the finish of her first week and it had been much like a first week at any office. Her spirits rose and she went home feeling almost light-hearted.

In fact the thing that chiefly worried her during the following weeks was not Jason as she had thought it was going to be, but Miss Rattray.

Miss Rattray was hostile to her; she gradually became utterly sure of that. A sort of intensely personal hostility, almost as if the pale little woman were jealous of her. But why? What had she ever done to Miss Rattray? The whole force of that furnace which, Judith had guessed, blazed in the narrow, flat bosom of the chief's secretary seemed to be concentrated upon *her*. Especially did it blaze each Sat-

urday morning when Judith went to pay her debt to Jason.

It would have been easier, perhaps, if it had been expressed in definite ways; for instance, if Miss Rattray had picked on her work; found fault; nagged her. But the chief's secretary did none of these things. Perhaps she recognized that, in common justice, she couldn't. For Judith was painstaking and conscientious and made as few mistakes as could possibly be expected. No, Ratty's hostility was suggested in subtle and elusive ways; in a look; a tone; a gesture. It was like an atmosphere around her.

If only she would *say* what was wrong, Judith thought!

Miss Rattray did say what was wrong; but not to Judith. To Jason.

One day when she had finished taking down letters for him, she sat looking at him with her watchful light eyes for a moment and then said:

"That Connor girl isn't a success here."

Jason, without answering her look, said:

"Oh?" on a note of indifferent question.

"No. The girls don't care for her. They find her reserved and stuck-up."

"Really?" Still that absolutely uninterested note of question.

"She's a jarring note. She doesn't mix."

"Anything against her work?"

"No. Not exactly. Only . . ."

Jason suddenly came to life, slapped the desk with the flat of his hand and said:

"Only *you* don't like her, I suppose? Well, it's about time you learned that when *I* give a girl a job

in my office, she keeps that job till *I* tell her to go. Understand?"

"Is it always for you to decide, Victor?" asked the little woman very quietly.

"Always."

Miss Rattray rose.

"Very well," she said, and for the time she let it go at that.

The very next day he called her into his office and told her to bring Judith with her. Her thin face flaming, she went and called Judith, saying that Mr. Jason wanted her.

Panic seized Judith; she coloured hotly, very conscious of the eyes of Miss Brown and Miss Paskey; interested eyes; inquisitive eyes; eyes full of meaning and significance. Mechanically she gathered her notebook and pencil and hurried after Miss Rattray.

This time, as she entered his room, Jason looked up squarely into her face and she met the full force of his dark, compelling eyes.

"Sit down," he said, and indicated a chair. "Miss Rattray, get these notes sorted out for me while I dictate. Take this, Miss Connor."

With a hand that shook slightly, Judith took down the letters he dictated, keeping her eyes down upon her notebook; not daring to look up; sensing the tension in the atmosphere. For twenty minutes or so, this work went on. Jason sat forward, leaning on his desk, while Miss Rattray sat beside him, silently sorting out the notes and laying them before him as he wanted them.

Once during an unusually long pause Judith gathered courage to glance up from the book on her

knee. But it was not Jason who caught her attention; it was Miss Rattray. For Miss Rattray, sitting drawn back into her chair, her back to the window and her face half in shadow, was looking at Jason with a sort of passion of intentness that made Judith think of a little drab animal, watching with shining eyes, waiting to spring. . . . Absurd! And yet? Judith drew a breath and squared her shoulders slightly as if trying to shake off the impression. What was in the look of those pale eyes? Love? Hate?

Miss Rattray leaned forward, slipping a page of notes competently before Jason, and with her movement the illusion and mystery were shattered.

So Jason, too, came within the range of the blaze in Ratty's soul! Jason came within the circle of Ratty's hostility. Just as she, Judith herself, did. And why? What had Jason done to her? Had he power over Ratty too? Were the girls wrong in thinking that Ratty had some hold upon Jason, and was it all the other way about? Was Ratty in *her* position? Obliged to work for this man because he had the power to make her?

Judith couldn't find answers to any of these questions.

"That's all; get them typed at once." Jason's voice brought her back to reality, and she escaped.

In the outer office she had to face the battery of three pairs of eyes. She faced them steadily and went quietly to her desk and began typing from her shorthand notes.

The loquacious Paskey was not fond of silence.

"Some have all the luck!" she said pointedly, and sighed. "What was it all about, Connor?"

"Just letters Mr. Jason wants in a hurry," answered Judith.

"Oh? Wasn't Ratty good enough?"

"He wanted Miss Rattray's help with his notes."

"*Generally,* he gets little Maudie in, if he wants two together."

Maud Taylor gave Judith a quick look. Something in the strained face, perhaps, appealed to her, for she said kindly:

"Ratty knew I'd a bunch of estimates to get through."

Judith answered her look gratefully.

"Well, what's the matter with me or Angel here? We're senior to Connor at all events." Miss Paskey tossed her head.

"Oh, well, the great white chief *is* the great white chief."

Maud went back to her work, and Miss Paskey dropped to discontented silence.

After this Judith was called to Jason's room as a regular thing several times a week.

Which didn't improve her relations with Miss Rattray, but again it was not to her but to Jason that Miss Rattray expressed her feeling. She went to his room for that especial purpose one afternoon some three weeks later.

Standing before his desk looking down at him, her face set and hard, she said abruptly:

"Victor, you're getting that Connor girl talked about."

"What's that to do with you?" he retorted.

"Not much perhaps. And yet . . ." She paused, her suspicious eyes narrowing. "Her interviews with

you every Saturday are making the whole office curious," she added.

Jason made an impatient gesture.

"What do you have to see her about?" The question came abruptly, and Miss Rattray seemed to watch for the answer rather than listen for it. It was unsatisfactory when it came.

"That's my business—and hers."

"If you'll take my advice . . ." began Miss Rattray slowly.

"When I want your advice about anything, Ratty, I'll let you know," broke in Jason.

"Well, go your own way, Victor; but I've a good memory; there are some things I do not forget." She let the words fall keenly.

Jason looked at her a moment, then laughed.

"Are you threatening me?" he asked, with indolent good humour.

"No. Oh, no! Just reminding you; that's all." Miss Rattray smiled too. But there was something rather terrible in the unsmiling quality of it. She added slowly:

"There aren't enough years in all eternity to make my memories fade. I'm just telling you, Victor, that's all."

. . . . . .

If Miss Rattray hoped to restrain Jason in any way, her words seemed to have hopelessly the opposite effect; they seemed even to give him an idea, for less than a week later, when Judith was called to his room he bluntly dismissed Miss Rattray, and when she, looking daggers, had gone, he turned his eyes upon Judith.

Her heart seemed to give a plunge of fear as he said:

"You are lunching with me to-day. Be ready punctually at one, and come to me here."

He bent over his desk again and went on with his work. There was to be no word from her; no appeal. He had spoken. She realized that, sick at heart, and went back to the outer room. The rest of the morning slid by in a sort of daze of dread.

At one she was dressed for the street and knocking at his door again, Miss Rattray watching from her desk. Jason told her to enter and she went in. He rose as she appeared and gathered his hat and gloves. Then swung round and looked her up and down appraisingly.

"You'll do," he pronounced at last.

She made a slight movement towards the corridor door, but he called her back. "This way," he said, and opened the door into Miss Rattray's rooms. She saw his intention then and coloured. Her hands were hot and sticky in her gloves, and she crushed her bag tightly beneath her arm; her knees felt as if they were literally knocking, but she could only follow him as he led her through Miss Rattray's room, where, if looks could have killed, she must assuredly have died; through the outer office, where three pairs of eyes followed and questioned. She knew she was blushing scarlet; she didn't dare to look aside and meet those eyes. She just had to go wheresoever this man led; just had to do whatsoever he ordered. But the cruelty of him! The refined cruelty of him!

Not only must he insist upon her going to lunch with him, but he must parade her going before the

eyes of her workmates! And she could do nothing; she was helpless against him. They reached the pavement, she at his heels still. He let her get into his big car first, and she shrank into her corner as he took his place beside her. Without needing to look up she could picture at least two pairs of eyes watching from the upper window.

Oh, yes! There was such a thing as power, and this man held it in his hands!

The luncheon at the Madrid that followed was a queerly unsensational affair. Beyond the usual questions and comments about what they should eat, Jason hardly spoke. He seemed to enjoy the food, which he ate with almost boyish gusto, but didn't appear to notice that she scarcely tasted it. She simply didn't know how to get through the meal. A feeling like tears in her throat made it almost physically impossible to swallow. It was not until coffee was served that he said:

"Getting on all right at the office?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Find the work easy?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Like being there?"

A pause; then:

"No." A single word, wholly unadorned.

"How's that?" His question held such genuine surprise that she looked at him in astonishment.

"I think you know," she said in a low voice.

"Blest if I do," he replied with a laugh. "Ratty nag you?"

"No."

"If she does, let me know."

Judith was silent.

Almost immediately he rose to go, and she rose too.

On the way back to the office he stopped the car outside a florist's; got out and disappeared into the shop. Her heart sank again. He came back to her, offering two small and peculiarly unpleasant spotted orchids wired together into a somewhat grotesque buttonhole posy.

"I . . . please, Mr. Jason . . . I'd rather not take them," she implored him.

"You'll take them," he said roughly.

She took them.

"You'll pin them in your coat," he went on.

She obeyed with hands that shook.

"You'll thank me for them."

She closed her eyes a moment, drew a breath and said, "Thank you."

He seemed satisfied, for he smiled that smile of his that had no charm to it; that was more like a baring of the teeth than a smile, and there was a curious gleam in his eyes.

The cruellest beast alive! The words went through her mind quickly. And yet that fool of a Paskey girl said he was an ideal man! If she only knew! If *she* could only tell someone, *any*one, the truth about this man!

She had to go back to the office with him; wearing his orchids; knowing that in his eyes was that satisfied look of triumph; of glory in his own power to wound and humiliate.

"And when we're in your room you'll thank me again; and you'll *smile* as you thank me." His voice came to her through her thoughts.

And when they reached the office, beneath the very eyes of her workmates, she did it. Did it with her head held high; her eyes dark and proud and her lips scarlet against the utter paleness of her face. She smiled, uttered her words of thanks and turned to her desk. Jason went through to his room.

Miss Paskey and Angela Brown looked at each other, Miss Paskey wirelessing messages with her eyebrows. Maud Taylor remained at her work without glancing or turning round. Judith was almost more acutely aware of the rigidity of Maud Taylor's back than of the glances of the two other girls.

Miss Paskey was, of course, the first to break the silence.

"Nice lunch?" she inquired.

Without looking at her Judith answered:

"Lunches at the Madrid are always nice, aren't they?"

"The Madrid, was it? Whoop! What did you have?"

To save her life Judith could not have told. Lunch had gone by like a bad dream. She plunged into invention:

"Oh, the usual sort of things. . . . *Hors d'œuvres* . . . fish . . . some sort of bird . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"A good lunch is wasted on you, that's plain."

"Or else the conversation was too enthralling," put in Angela with meaning. "Ghastly looking things, aren't they?" she added, indicating the orchids in Judith's lapel.

"They eat you alive or something," said Miss

Paskey. "Well, that's a suitable buttonhole for a man like V.J. to give a girl. Quite symbolic, I call it."

The chatter went on, always with a little undercurrent of second meaning, until Judith could have screamed. She didn't, of course. She kept steadily on with her work, praying for the moment when it should strike these girls that they weren't paid to talk. The moment came at last, and with it the blessed relief of silence. But Judith was heavy-hearted when she went home that evening. Jason had shown his power; used it; and she had been unable to do anything against it. The fantastic had come true, after all.

What was it James Barry had said? That the cruelties of civilization made the cruelties of savagery seem almost gentle by comparison? Well, it was true. Here she was, in the hands of a civilized savage; a man whose primitive lust for cruel power was expressed in subtle, civilized ways.

How far away and long ago James Barry seemed now! The rose garden, what a distant dream! Life had been difficult, perhaps, but at least it had been normal. Its difficulties, its disasters, had been possible and understandable ones. Things that were commonplaces compared with the fantastic nightmare element that Jason had introduced.

Now, she lived in one long torment of dread that to-day, this morning, he would do something to single her out; make her conspicuous; make the whole office wink and nudge and comment. Or if not this morning then this afternoon. Or to-morrow.

Terribly wearing, life lived like this, on a constant tension. But Jason had discovered this means of ex-

hibiting his power over her, and while it pleased him, he would continue to exploit it. The ordeal by luncheon was repeated, not once, but many times. Always with the preliminary parade through the two outer rooms; always with the little posy of flowers to put the finishing touch to her shamed indignation.

One day, strung beyond the point of endurance, she turned on him, protesting hotly, scalding tears stinging her eyelids.

"I can't lunch with you. I can't! I . . . I *won't!* It's preposterous of you to make me. It makes it wretched for me with the other girls. You know what they are thinking; what they are whispering to each other; what they mean with their eyes when they look at me. . . . *You* know . . ." She caught a breath.

He stood looking at her; big and still; her words beating against him as uselessly as a flurry of foam against a rock.

"One o'clock, as usual," was all he said.

And that day, instead of flowers in her buttonhole, she came back to the office wearing a bracelet, a costly slender thing of gold set with a line of small winking diamonds.

The righteous scorn of the girls was naked and unashamed; they took no trouble to veil it. While Judith sat with bent head, her heart a tumult within her. It was all so unfair! So ironical. To have to endure the stings of a girl like Paskey, who, Judith guessed, stung from jealousy rather than from righteousness. A careless, loose-minded girl, and yet Judith, who was innocent, miserable and helpless, had to bear her insults and say nothing.

That evening Maud Taylor lingered after the others had gone, and then opened the subject with Miss Rattray.

"I can't understand that Connor girl," she began.

Miss Rattray's answer came with sombre violence.

"Easy enough, I should have thought."

"I'm not so sure," said Miss Taylor slowly. "Did you see her bracelet to-day?"

"Yes."

"She wore it as if she loathed it. It might have been a poisonous snake round her wrist."

"I shouldn't let her manner deceive you," said Miss Rattray bitterly. "A man doesn't give *anything* for nothing. And a girl who's been years in business isn't green."

"No. Perhaps you're right. But . . . Oh, well . . ."

And Maud Taylor left it at that. Next day, though, she made an opportunity to see Judith alone.

"Been in business long?" she asked pleasantly.

"Seven or eight years. Why?" replied Judith.

"Oh. D'you know what's likely to be thought when the chief hits on one of the minor clerks as a lunch companion?"

Judith's face was flooded with crimson.

"Yes."

"Don't you care?"

"Awfully!" The word came in a shake, and Judith caught a breath. "I care awfully," she added more quietly.

Maud Taylor was puzzled. There was something decidedly queer about this business.

"If he takes his own secretary—Ratty, for in-

stance—nothing is said. But you . . ." Maud broke off.

"I know," said Judith miserably.

"Accepting presents is another thing."

"I know."

"Then why accept them?" Maud put the question bluntly.

Judith was silent; then, vehemently:

"I *hate* them."

"You have only to refuse them."

"I always thought that, too."

Again Maud looked at her with puzzled eyes.

"Are you keen on the chief?" she asked abruptly, and she thought she had never seen such fire in any eyes as she saw in Judith's now.

"I hate him."

"I don't understand you, Connor."

"I . . . I can't explain. Oh, do leave me alone!"

The anguish in Judith's voice hit right on Maud's heart; she didn't know what to believe.

"I was going to ask you if I could help you in any way," she said gently.

"You can't. Thank you . . . awfully; but you can't."

"You're a striking looking girl, you know."

"Am I?"

"Very unusual."

"I can't see it and I don't care."

"V.J. seems both to see it and to care a good deal," suggested Maud.

"No," said Judith quickly. "It isn't that. He doesn't care. You've got it all wrong. Everyone has."

"Then what is it?"

"I . . . don't know. . . ."

"Oh, get away!" cried Maud in exasperation. "If there's one thing that makes me sick it's a liar."

"I'm *not* lying. I'm not." Tears gathered in Judith's eyes. "Oh, do believe me. If I could tell you I would. But I can't."

Maud began to believe her then. Began to believe that there really was a lot that she didn't understand.

"Now look here, Connor; I've held off you when the other girls have been shooting at you, just because I felt there was something queer about it."

"I know you have and I've been grateful for it."

"But . . ."

"I know what you are going to say. That I make it impossible for you to be friends with me. Well, I can't explain. So if you can't take me on trust you must join the other girls, and shoot at me too."

Judith turned away abruptly and left Maud with nothing more said. But Maud didn't join the other girls. She was a level-headed young woman, just-minded and kind, with an honest impulse to try to see the other fellow's point of view.

One day when Judith was going to lunch by herself, looking white and forlorn, Maud suggested that they should make a duet of it. They did and it was a success. Over a cosy little table in an unpretentious tea-shop they consumed "two-on-toast and coffee, twice," and, beginning cautiously, were presently talking with ease and interest. Maud's suspicions of Judith receded further and further as they talked. This was no brazen hussy. This was no gold-digger. This was a sincere, deep-feeling girl, fine and honourable, but horribly, tragically afraid of something.

Maud loosened up; flung away her cautious reserve and set herself to bring the comfort and relief of confidence to Judith.

Judith was grateful. It *was* a relief to have her thoughts taken off her problems for a while.

Maud Taylor had known Pat pretty well, and since Pat, by this time, really had managed to drop into a rather scrubby little job in Manchester, Judith could speak of him freely without having to lie on his behalf. Both his job and the distance of it were a great comfort to Judith.

"An attractive fellow, but, if you'll forgive me, rather easily led, I should say," diagnosed Maud Taylor.

And Judith agreed.

"I'm hoping that he will steady up in time," she said, but remembering her father, she didn't feel that she had much precedent for this hope.

"The only person I've ever seen Ratty take any cheek from!"

"Really?"

"Yes; he had a way with her; could make her melt like snow in the sun. Joked with her and made her laugh even."

"He's always been popular. She won't take anything from me, and I've never even *tried* any cheek." Judith sighed.

Maud punctured the second poached egg and mopped the yolk up with a piece of toast on the end of her fork. Then she said:

"Oh, you mustn't take Ratty too seriously. She's a good sort really, only suffering from an ingrowing grouch of some sort. She's vitriolic, I'll admit, but

then she's got her difficulties and responsibilities, you know."

"Has she got any people?" asked Judith.

"Only a young nephew. A most difficult youth I gather. Some sore of genius or something. Ratty isn't talkative, but I've a sort of feeling she's anxious about him."

"Does she have to keep him?"

"Sole support, I believe. He's alone in the world except for her, and she's alone except for him."

"What is he a genius at?"

"Electricity or wireless or something."

"Why doesn't she get him into Jason's then?"

"Just what *I* say, but she flares up like a turkey-cock at the bare idea."

"She hates me, and I can't think why."

"V.J., my dear."

"But there isn't anything *in* that, I tell you."

"Well and I'm beginning to believe you. But no one else is likely to. Least of all Ratty."

"Is *she* keen on him?"

"I wonder, sometimes. It's difficult to tell with Ratty."

"Maud, *you* are keen on him?"

"I?" Maud opened her honest brown eyes wide. "Good Lord! No! Not in my wildest dreams."

"All the girls in the office seem to be."

"Not *this* child."

"I'm glad. Don't you think he's the cruellest beast alive?"

"Oh, that's what some of the men call him when he's caught them slacking. I'm not as violent about him as all that. My quarrel with him is that he's too

darn well able to look after himself. I like something a bit more helpless. Something that needs you. I'm your good old-fashioned domestic type; an antique; a museum piece!"

Judith looked at her, laughing slightly.

"You *aren't,*" she contradicted. "You're too jolly good at your job for that."

"Domesticity is my job really, only no man's had the good sense to discover it yet. Meantime one has to help to keep the home fires burning. My father's only a bank clerk, poor dear, and there are seven of us all told. What's your family?"

"Mother, father, Pat and me," Judith told her a little abruptly. "I'd do anything for mother," she added, after a moment.

Only for mother? thought Maud, and changed the subject.

"I'm the kind that waves to hubby as he goes round the corner every morning; and puts his slippers to warm every evening; and has a baby a year till there're so many of 'em you go giddy trying to count 'em; and settles down at forty to a middle-age spread without a regret in the world!"

"Oh, I'd try not to give way to the middle-age spread," said Judith.

"But then you're the romantic type; the type that marvellous adventures happen to. First time I saw you, I christened you The Shulamite. I'm hazy as to whether that's complimentary or just the reverse. But the name sounds like you. There's some line that goes, 'Thy lips are like a thread of scarlet,' or something like that. Well, that's just how you looked when Ratty brought you into the office."

"You seem to get people summed up pretty quickly. What type is Paskey? And Brown?"

"Oh, Paskey's easy. Some rich guy'll take her in tow some day, and she'll feed exclusively on chocs and Charlotte Russe and grow so fat that her pearl necklaces will be lost between her second and third chins, and . . ."

"Help!" cried Judith, laughing. "The picture is too ghastly!" After a moment she added slowly, "One needn't mind too much what a girl of that sort says, thinks, or insinuates about one."

"Mind? Don't even think of it," answered Maud with refreshing energy. "As for Brown; well, Brown'll always watch out for herself. She's a blonde; a real brassy blonde. There aren't ever any flies on real brassy blondes."

"And—*me,* Maud? What, honestly, do you think of me?" Judith leaned across the table, speaking earnestly.

"My child, I *think* I rather owe you an apology."

"That's sweet of you."

"Not at all. But I believe there are things I don't quite understand, and I'll bide my time, suspend judgment, hold my tongue, until I *do.*"

"That's generous."

"No, only commonly decent. Meantime, let's have lunch together again, shall we?"

And Judith, with feeling, said that she'd love to.

Chapter VII

A STRONG friendship developed between these two, and it was like balm to poor Judith to have honest, reliable Maud to turn to. It helped her over the difficulties of the office and the difficulties at home. For home life was by no means a bed of roses for Judith at this time. Her father was always cadging small sums of money from her, and if she refused he would get what he wanted on credit and have the bill sent to her. She never knew where she was as regards money, and lived in constant dread of a really devastating bill being handed in; perhaps even with threats. Then her mother, who knew by this time that she was working at Jason's, was so innocently delighted with the arrangement. She was always saying how lovely it was that Judith should be with such a splendid firm, and how kind it had been of *dear* Mr. Jason to take her on in darling Pat's place, when he, sweet boy, got that *splendid* post in Manchester. This was the version of the affair that Judith had allowed her to get hold of, and she was glad that the gentle little woman knew nothing of the truth, and yet it made it most nerve-rackingly difficult for Judith to listen, and nod and agree and hope that she sounded sincere.

It was one of the little nagging aspects of the situation which were continually cropping up and which proved so wearing.

One evening when she went home, her mother told her that she'd heard from Pat.

"Such a lovely letter, dear," the little woman said, her eyes shining.

"I'm so glad you've heard," answered Judith. "Pat is mostly the world's worst correspondent, isn't he?" She said that lightly, laughing as she moved about getting supper ready.

"Dear boy, he's always so busy. I think he really works *too* hard, Judy. He says that he is kept at the office night after night till past nine, getting through extra work."

"That *does* seem a little extreme," remarked Judith, glancing at her mother, who was sitting by the living-room fire, looking very little and frail, a shawl over her tiny shoulders. She always seemed to shrivel with the first cold of early winter and remain shrivelled till the spring came. Judith's heart was smitten with fear as she looked at her. Surely such a little slip of a creature was scarcely human enough to belong to this earth!

"But hard work doesn't hurt a healthy young man," she added, fighting down her fear and speaking cheerily.

"I think you scarcely know, dearie, what hard work means. In *your* nice, easy position the work is a mere nothing compared with what my poor boy has to do. You see, he's such a *great* favourite with Mr. Robertson, his chief. Mr. Robertson *will* have him do things; no one else suits. Of course, it's wonderful to be so highly thought of, but then that's no more than the boy deserves. I'm not saying it just because I'm his mother. I've plenty to go on. Look

how highly thought of he was at Jason's! I'm sure he *lived* in Mr. Jason's pocket."

Judith, setting out plates upon the table, drew a breath. How grotesquely apt her mother's phrase was!

"But then it's always been the same," the thin little thread of a voice went on. "Pat has always won all hearts, ever since he was a baby. So friendly! So happy! So sweet-tempered! You were always a stand-offish sort of child, Judy love, but Pat looked up in his little roguish way, always ready for a joke and a laugh."

"Yes, darling; Pat is fascinating, I know."

It was difficult, sometimes, to say these things convincingly.

"Judy dear, the poor boy says he's short of money. You could send him a pound or two, I'm sure." So confidently said! As if there could be no sort of question about it!

"I'm afraid I can't, mummy," answered Judith very quietly.

"Can't, dear? But Pat says he needs it very badly!"

"We need it here, too."

"But the boy has so *many* expenses, dear; and he says his health is suffering from his hard work and long hours."

Long hours! Yes, thought Judith, she could thoroughly believe in those long hours! But where and how were they spent!

"Mummy darling, it simply isn't possible. I just haven't got it to give."

"I'm sure you make a splendid wage, dear. What can become of it all?"

"Well, it's the *only* wage in this house, isn't it?"

"Now, Judy love, it isn't kind to your father to speak like that! I'm sure he's tried and tried to get work to do. But a man like him can't take just *any*thing that's offered, can he? I mean, he has a great deal of pride, dearie. You mustn't ever forget that."

Judith rather bitterly thought that he was never likely to allow her to forget it. Pride! The word made her angry. Where was her father this evening? Where had he been all day? Was it his *pride* that paid for his cigars and his whisky, and his "doggy" clothes, and these days and nights with his boon companions? Father and son; they were a matching pair!

"I'm not unkind, mummy," she said, with a shake in her voice. "Only the fact remains that there is only my money to keep us. Pat sends nothing home, does he?"

"And how should he!" The little woman looked round the back of her chair, quite fired. "How should he, a boy like him, with his way to make in the world! I don't believe in letting the family be a drag on a rising young man. Pat has more than enough use for his money without sending any home, *I'm* sure!"

Judith was silent. Even with her mother, to whom she had never said a harsh thing in her life, it was not always easy, these days, to speak gently. She went to the kitchen and came back presently with the laden supper-tray.

"Come along, darling. It's all ready," she said.

Little Mrs. Connor took her place at the table, still talking glowingly of the wonders of Pat.

"I must write to him to-morrow; the dear boy will be anxious to hear. Now, Judy dear, I can say you'll

let him have a little something, can't I?" She spoke persuasively.

"Mummy darling, it's impossible. I haven't *got* it," cried Judith in distress.

Mrs. Connor sighed and lapsed into hurt silence. The rest of supper passed in this atmosphere. As Judith rose at the finish, Mrs. Connor looked up at her and said:

"You've always been a little *hard* towards Pat, Judy."

Judith had to escape to the kitchen, there to clench her hands and pray for control. Control of her tongue that wanted to shout out the story of her "hardness" towards Pat! Control of her heart that seemed like breaking. . . . Hard! Her mother said she was hard! She was so bitterly hurt by this that for days it seemed to wipe out Jason and the problems of the office, and to become the only thing that counted. Jason could shame and humiliate her, but only one person in the world could take her heart and stick knives in it; only one person in the world had the power to *hurt* her so overwhelmingly as to make every other suffering unimportant. Her mother. The one human being she had ever had to love with all her strength.

And now her mother was cold to her; distant, hurt, with a look of tears in her eyes that wrung Judith with anguish. She wanted to throw all the few shillings she possessed into her mother's lap and implore her to send them to Pat, if only that look could be wiped out of those beloved eyes and that cold manner made warm and sweet and loving again.

It was quite suddenly, in the middle of the night,

that the idea came to her, out of nothing, as it were, that the bracelet Jason had given her was worth a great deal and could be sold for a considerable sum. Her heart thumped so hard as she lay in the dark thinking of this that the whole room seemed to throb with its beating. He had given it to her outright, putting no restrictions upon her absolute possession of it. To him, it had been just a means of shaming her; of forcing her to wear and display a symbol of his power. He had not insisted that she was to keep it; neither had he appeared to notice the absence of it when she didn't wear it. It had served his purpose; well, now it should serve hers. It should take the tearful look from her mother's eyes; it should bring her mother back to her.

She got quietly out of bed, put on the light and crossed to her chest of drawers. Kneeling down, she took from the bottom drawer a little leather case, opened it and looked at the bracelet lying in a bed of blue velvet. The diamonds gleamed and winked.

"You beastly, wicked thing!" she said in a vehement whisper. But, in spite of her words, she almost loved the bracelet at this moment; it was going to bring her mother back to her. Nothing counted beside that.

She rose, shut the case and slipped it into her bag ready to take with her in the morning, then got back into bed feeling wrought up and excited.

It was not, she found next day, nearly as easy to sell a valuable bracelet as she had imagined it was going to be. It was its very value that made the difficulty.

During the luncheon hour she hurried out in search

of a suitable jeweller; found a big, glittering and imposing place in a street off Southampton Row and went in.

A sleek young man asked her business.

"I want to s-sell a bracelet," said Judith, stammering slightly from sheer nervousness.

The sleek young man gave her a look up and down and then took her into an office at the back of the shop.

Here a grey-haired man, seated at the desk, looked up at her over his glasses and said:

"Well?"

"Wants to sell a bracelet," the young man explained.

"Whose bracelet?" demanded the grey-haired man.

They both looked at Judith.

"My own," she said hurriedly.

"Let me see it," said the man at the desk.

Judith went to the desk, opened her bag, slipped the bracelet out of the case and gave it to him. He looked at it, then at Judith.

"Your own?" he said.

"Yes."

"Had it long?"

"No."

"Oh, it isn't a family piece?"

"Oh no."

"Well, how *did* you get it, then?"

He was a most abrupt old man, and his eyes peered at her almost accusingly over his glasses.

"It . . . it was given to me," said Judith, faltering a little.

"Did you have a letter with it when it was given to you?"

"No."

"Oh. Just given to you. Just snapped around your wrist, eh?"

"Yes."

He looked at her appraisingly; from her neat little hat, down the length of her well-worn winter coat, right to her by-no-means-new shoes. Judith felt herself going hot with indignation. She realized now what his questions were leading to. He was actually wondering whether she had come by the bracelet honestly! He was making notes of her modest clothing and comparing it with the luxury of the bracelet!

"Rich relation?" he asked at last.

"No. A . . . a friend." The word, applied to Jason, nearly choked her. "But very rich."

The old man handed back the bracelet.

"I don't want it," he said shortly.

Scarcely a moment later Judith found herself being shown out, most politely, by the sleek young man. She was stormy with indignation.

"I believe they thought I'd stolen it!" she said to herself as she hurried down the street.

Jewellers, as a class, seemed particularly prone to harbour this suspicion, she found, for she met with no better success in the next shop she tried. Nor in the next and the next. In desperation she decided to try a pawnbroker.

"Pawnbrokers will take *any*thing without question," she thought; which shows how very little she knew of them.

With much screwing up of courage, and a dreadful feeling that the eyes of the whole world were upon her, she went into the very next establishment that sported the avuncular symbol over its doorway. She was out again in under two minutes, with the bracelet still in her possession, and a panic in her heart that the man she had just interviewed was going to ring up the police the moment her foot touched the pavement.

It was nearly time to go back to the office; she had had no lunch and the bracelet was still unsold. She felt rather desperate. The money she had imagined was going to be so easy to get was so terribly important to her.

It was a friendly but ugly little Jew who finally bought the thing. She came upon his shop when she had given up hope and was hurrying back to Robsart Street; a little place with a narrow entry, a mixed collection of jewellery, ancient and modern, in its small window, and a sign telling the world that the owner of the shop bought jewellery at top prices. She went in.

The friendly little Jew behind the counter smiled at her, displaying thereby a hideous set of tobacco-stained teeth. He also addressed her as "my tear" in a fatherly manner that encouraged her. She told him what she wanted.

He examined the bracelet with a little gleam in his prominent brown eyes, and then asked for its pedigree of ownership. She told him, without detail, how she had become possessed of it, and he actually appeared to believe her, for he nodded his rough grey head and said:

"Yes, yes, yes." Then he said: "You know the shop where it was bought?"

She told him, eagerly, the name of the shop, and produced the velvet case from her bag and showed him the name in the lid. He took it from her, looked at it, fitted the bracelet into it, and then said:

"Your name, please?"

She told him.

"Address?"

She gave it.

He said a succession of "yes, yes, yesses," which covered the thought, "I should tink I do know an honest human ven I see von." Then he asked:

"How much do you wand for it?"

Judith hadn't any idea, and begged him to make an offer. He refused and finally forced her to name a figure. She named a hundred pounds because it was the first number that popped into her head, and waited, breathlessly, to be annihilated with indignant scorn. But the little Jew merely halved it and said:

"Fifty?"

Judith breathed again. Evidently the bracelet was worth a good deal.

"Oh, I think you ought to make it more than that," she said, gaining courage, and a little haggling match followed.

She got back to the office that day nearly fifteen minutes late, but with seventy-five whole pound notes in her bag. Her heart was singing in her breast. She wanted to laugh and to dance. Seventy-five whole pound notes to flutter into her little mother's lap! Seventy-five! It was a fortune! She didn't remember

that she had had no lunch; she was too happy and excited.

By the time she reached home that evening, though, her excitement had dropped and she had been thinking steadily. Thought had made her decide against the fluttering of the whole seventy-five into her mother's lap. The impulse was there, but how on earth could she ever explain away such an amount? No; she must keep the money preciously, and give it a little at a time; a pound here and there, as her mother asked for it.

After supper, when her father had gone out, she put two of the notes into Mrs. Connor's hand, kissed her fondly and said:

"Mummy, I managed to find these for Pat." Her voice shook slightly.

Mrs. Connor looked down at the notes and then up at Judith; her eyes were radiant with pleasure.

"Why, Judy love, I knew you couldn't harden your heart against your brother for long! How pleased he'll be! How pleased he'll be! You dear good girl!"

It was a tone she hadn't heard in her mother's voice since the evening she had refused to help Pat, and her arms went round the little woman in a hungry way, and she kissed her again and again. The evening passed happily, and Judith went to the office next day strengthened by the knowledge that the coldness between her mother and herself had been melted.

She had never imagined that anything that Jason did would ever help her. But now she cherished that money, hidden in a box pushed far back beneath her wardrobe, and set her lips tight and said to herself in a new, hard way, that wasn't like her:

"Well, he's done this, at any rate. And any use I can make of him, I'll *make* in future. He shan't have it all his own way. . . ."

. . . . . .

The strength of her reconciliation with her mother helped her to bear the daily routine of humiliation that she suffered at the office; and she needed all the help she could get.

She had always nursed a little hope that help would come through Grimwade in some way. He was friendly and kind; she had imagined that he might be able to stand between Jason and herself, but Grimwade was such a very movable quantity. More than half his time was spent going to and fro between Jason's in London and the big branch in Liverpool. From time to time he asked her how she was getting on, and as she always gritted her teeth and answered: "Fine, thanks," that was all the clue he had to the situation. It is true, he didn't altogether believe that things *were* so fine for her, but he imagined that that was due to Pat and home anxieties, and had no idea that Jason was at the root of it.

The thing was always hitting her from some new quarter. One day the young man in the inquiry office spoke to her of the chief and gave her a slightly leering smile and a very definite wink. Flaming with fury, she felt she could hit him; but dared only to go by, taking no notice, head held high. Another time when she had been to lunch with Jason, she overheard a group of messenger girls whispering her name and coupling it with his.

They didn't know how little she tasted of his

lunches, nor that the moment she was free of the office she flung his expensive orchids into the gutter. They didn't know the torture and shame that was in her heart or, as human creatures, they couldn't have added one word to it.

For a while Jason made no further move, then one day in early winter he sent for her and told her that she was going to the theatre with him that evening. She said nothing. At least that would be after office hours. At least there could not be that parade before the staff that she dreaded. She was almost relieved that his mind should have turned from the luncheon hour to the evening. No one would know anything about *this*.

But her relief was short-lived.

During the afternoon, when Angela Brown was dispensing cups of tea and biscuits, a messenger brought up a long cardboard box and laid it on Judith's desk.

"For Miss Connor," said the girl, and went out again.

Judith sat looking at the box, hearing through a sort of haze of horror the excited chirrupings of Miss Paskey who was reading the name on the box and begging Judith to open it.

"Petronella! My dear! She makes the most divine frocks! *We* can't do these things on *our* salaries, can we, Angel?"

"It isn't for me. It *can't* be," said Judith, the thumping of heart actually shaking the words.

"Miss Judith Connor," read Miss Paskey. "Says so plain as a pike-staff. For goodness' sake, Connor, who's your tame millionaire? Or is it . . . ?" She

jerked her head in the direction of Jason's office and winked.

"Open the box and let's have a look," said Angela, and she found a pair of office scissors.

"No!" cried Judith, "I won't open it. It isn't for me, I tell you. . . . It *isn't.*"

But Angela wasn't going to be denied a glimpse of a Petronella frock. She cut the ribbons that tied the box, jerked off the lid, and then with Miss Paskey literally dived into a foam of tissue papers, clawing them out and scattering them to the floor. In vain Judith tried to stop her. Both Paskey and Brown meant to see the Petronella frock. They almost endangered it in their eagerness.

It was out at last, a sinuous, snaky, spankled thing, that looked like a straying shaft of moonlight in the prosaic office.

Judith stood, a hand pressed tight over her heart, her face white, her eyes dark and stormy, and looked at the delicate glistening thing.

"It isn't for me. It isn't. It isn't," was all she could say.

Maud Taylor sat stirring her tea, watching Judith with troubled brown eyes. What *was* it all about? Judith looked ghastly white and stricken; really *ill.*

Miss Paskey dived suddenly and picked up a card that had fallen from the frock.

"From Victor Jason with best wishes. Madrid this evening at seven sharp, as arranged." She read this out slowly and distinctly, and then repeated triumphantly the last four words:

"Seven sharp, *as arranged.* . . . Doesn't look as

if it was such a surprise to someone as someone's trying to make out, does it, Angel?"

"Give it to me," said Judith, and there was suddenly something rather terrible in her voice. "Give it to me!"

She snatched the frail shimmer of spangles from Angela's hand, and clutching it tight, she went straight into Miss Rattray's room; straight through to Jason's; flung open his door and confronted him, holding the frock out towards him in a shaking hand.

"How dared you think that I'd wear clothes given by you? How dared you give me this? I won't wear it. . . . I won't go to the theatre with you. I won't lunch with you ever again or wear your humiliating orchids. I won't work for you any more. I'll go. Right away. Never come back. . . . Never see you. . . ."

Her voice was low and broken and harsh. She was shaking from head to foot.

"Oh, you're unspeakable! A cad! A base-minded, unspeakable cad!"

She flung the frock on to the desk. Heavy with its spangles, it fell and slid, displacing papers, and knocking an ash-tray with a half-smoked cigar in it, on to the carpet. But she was blind to everything; she was in a frenzy of rebellion. He sat back in his chair looking at her, a gleam of satisfied interest in his dark eyes, as if he were watching the antics of some mechanical figure which his own ingenuity had made possible and set working.

"You're just doing all you can to shame me!" her raging voice went on. "You make it possible for the girls to sneer; for the men to leer and wink; you're

making my life a veritable hell on earth! And all just for . . . for *you*. For *your* fun. But I won't stand it any more. You can't make me. I'll go. . . . I'll . . ." She broke off sharply.

He moved now, to take his keys from his pocket; to choose one in a leisurely manner; to insert it in the keyhole of a drawer of his desk. She uttered a cry of despair and held out imploring hands. Her attitude of revolt crumpled.

"It's still there, you know," he said casually. "That paper that you are so interested in."

"I . . . Oh, I know! I know!" she cried miserably. "You've got me caught and held. I must have been mad. . . ."

"Why do you mind what the office thinks?" he asked, as if he were genuinely interested.

"If I *were* careless and promiscuous I shouldn't. But I'm *not*. And it's shameful of you to make them all think that I am! Where's the fun of it! What can it mean to you!"

He leaned forward on his desk, clasping his hands, and smiled.

"It's fun, all right, or I shouldn't do it. You can bet your life on that," he said.

"Don't you know what mercy means?"

"Not when it crosses my fun. Can't you see what fun it must be? Watch me, now." Still smiling, and apparently in the highest good humour, he went on:

"Come here," and he indicated a spot on the far side of his chair.

She hesitated, but only for a moment, then moved to his side.

"Pick up that ash-tray."

She picked it up, and the cigar.

"Find me another cigar."

She reached for the box on his desk, took out a cigar and gave it to him. He bit it and held it between his teeth.

"Light it for me."

She struck a match and held it, with a hand that trembled, to the end of the cigar. He caught her wrist to steady her, and her hand was instantly fighting his. He only laughed and let her struggle; while he held her wrist in a grip like a vise. The cigar lighted, he let her go and looked up into her face, laughing again.

"See the fun of it?" he asked.

"I think," she said, the words coming through tight lips, "I think you must be mad. It's the only thing, and the *kindest* thing, to believe of you."

He shrugged his big shoulders and said:

"Take your dress and go."

She picked up the spangly heap and moved towards the door, trailing it beside her.

"Thank me for it." His voice came after her.

She turned and thanked him.

"It's great fun," he remarked.

She went back into the outer room, walking limply, her strength gone, the dress dragging along the floor.

Chapter VIII

THE evening was a curious one. Waxy pale, with defiance in the shine of her eyes, the carriage of her head, in her walk, her gestures, in everything about her, Judith, in the sequin dress, first dined at the Madrid with Jason, very silent, very proud, very cold. Very near to tears sometimes, but determined not to show it. And then sat with him in a big, first-tier box at the Harlequin Theatre, her eyes turned towards the stage and seeing only a blur of lights and colours; hearing only a confused murmuring of words and melodies, broken by gales of laughter from the audience. She sat near the front of the box, because he had pointed out that position to her, and she would not argue or protest; she had screwed her courage to the sticking point this evening and would not let him have the pleasure of seeing that his power irked and infuriated and frightened her.

On the blue plush edge of the box was an enormous and elaborate box of chocolates still tied up in wide silver ribbons. Jason had given it to her and she had put it there, without attempting to open it. She did not speak unless he spoke to her; she did not really hear what was being said on the stage nor really see what was being done, and she sat unmoved by either sentiment or humour, or tunefulness.

"He's very amusing, this comedian fellow," observed Jason after a while.

"Is he?" said Judith indifferently, while within was a tiny sense of triumph that she had forced him to speak first.

"Aren't you watching him?" he went on.

"Not particularly."

"Well, watch him, then," he commanded bluntly.

Judith obediently followed the comedian round the stage with her eyes. A shout of laughter went up from the audience as the comedy waxed fast and furious, but Judith remained unsmiling.

"Don't you think he's funny?" Jason demanded.

"No. . . . Yes, I suppose he is, but he doesn't amuse me."

"I wish you to be amused." His tone, dogged and hectoring, told her that his lips had gone thin and hard in the way she knew so well. She turned to him with sudden swiftness.

"Even you can't make me feel what I don't feel," she said in a low voice.

Their eyes met.

"He doesn't believe that," she thought to herself quickly. "He even thinks that his power can command my feelings. Well, he's wrong! He's wrong! That's one thing he can't touch, can't influence, can't force." There was triumph again in that thought. At least all her inner life of emotion was her own; he couldn't touch it. No command of his could affect it; alter it by so much as a fraction of a degree. Her daily outward life might be utterly at his disposal, but her thoughts, her feelings were completely at her own. He could not even *know* anything of them; and if he chose to guess at them could only do so as the most ordinary, casual outsider. Power, as he used

it, was, after all, a thing of externals; a superficial thing. If she could always remember that; let him work his power in outward ways and fix her own attention upon her inner life. . . . Yes, that was a way to make things easier; that was a good and comforting idea.

He did not speak further until the first interval; then when the lights went up and chatter broke out in the theatre, he rose.

"There are some friends of mine down there in the stalls. I'm going to fetch them," he said. "I shall be obliged if you will make some effort to be agreeable to them."

He left the box, and her feeling of triumph petered out.

If he couldn't command her happiness, he could make her miserable. To be here with him, alone in this box, and have to be introduced to his friends! To endure their questioning eyes as she had to endure the looks at the office! She suddenly rose, the determination to make her escape while he was away, assailing her. She gathered her cloak and crept to the door of the box, opened it and went out into the corridor. She was half-way down a short flight of stairs when, looking down into the crowded foyer, she saw him coming towards the stairs, bringing two men and a woman with him. Their voices rose to her.

"Yes, it's ages since we saw you, Victor," the woman was saying. "But then it's ages since we saw anyone civilized, isn't it, Bryan?"

Civilized! thought Judith. They called Victor Jason civilized! Did anyone know him for what he really was? As she knew him? She saw the woman

who had spoken turn to a broad-shouldered, stocky man who was pressing his way along just behind her.

"Just back from another of your expeditions?" Jason put in.

The man called Bryan answered.

"Well, scarcely an expedition this time. Just a visit, don't you know."

A sudden outburst of chatter around them lost the rest of the speech to Judith. She pressed back against the wall, realizing that she couldn't continue her flight and not be caught by Jason, and yet hating to give in and go back to the box.

The thing that decided her came, as it were, sheer out of the blue. The sound of James Barry's name, spoken by the man called Bryan.

"Jim Barry. . . . Yes, wild chap, isn't he? Ran into him in Penang. . . . On some crazy mission again. . . . He likes to step off the edge into space . . ."

Laughter followed and drowned the rest. Jim Barry! On some crazy mission. A man who likes to step off into space. It must be her James Barry. Must be. There couldn't be two of him. With her heart thumping, Judith slid up the stairs again, keeping close against the wall.

If these people knew Barry they might be able to tell her how to get word to him. She'd stay and find out all she could; quietly, unsuspiciously, so that Jason shouldn't guess that she had ever met James Barry! James Barry! The mere sound of the name brought hope and confidence! Brought a colour to her cheeks that was not anger; a sparkle to her eyes that was not only defiance.

When Jason entered the box, she was sitting in her chair, her cloak lightly round her shoulders as it had been before, and her hands outstretched to the big chocolate box, busily untying its silver ribbons.

Her whole aspect was changed; she seemed quite prepared to obey his command to be agreeable. She shot a quick look at him as he entered. He returned it, rather to her surprise, with a sidelong glance that was full of humour. The smile with the charm to it was parting his lips, and altogether he looked quite engaging and sociable. Introductions followed briefly, and Judith discovered that Jason's friends were Mr. and Mrs. Bryan Soper and Mr. Nigel Lyle.

The Sopers were very easy people to get on with; blunt and frank and jolly. Both very tanned and with the weather-beaten look that comes from the sort of expeditions they delighted to indulge in. Mrs. Soper's bosom was marked with a deep and clearly defined V of sunburn which led abruptly to surprisingly white shoulders. She was slangy, loud, dropped her final g's; smoked incessantly and laughed a lot. Judith liked her, for her eyes were honest and fearless, and if her speech tended towards the feline occasionally, her laugh had an infectious chuckly kindness. Bryan Soper really scarcely counted in the presence of his wife; she so overshadowed him with her own vitality. Nigel Lyle Judith dismissed as a young man-about-town who hadn't much to say for himself and said it in the very latest Oxford drawl. And here she was entirely mistaken, for Lyle had a good deal to say for himself when he chose, as she was to discover not so very much later.

To Judith's relief there was no smallest hint among them that they found the fact of her being at the theatre alone with Jason the least bit odd. And of course, she reflected, it *wasn't* particularly odd, so long as they didn't know that she was one of his minor clerks. She had forgotten that people outside the office wouldn't know who she was and that in these advanced days nothing would be thought. She had become so used to the difficulties of the office that this hadn't occurred to her until now when she realized that these friends of Jason's merely took her to be a girl of his social set and let it go at that. For the first time since it had come into her possession, she was grateful to the sequin dress for lending her this air of rich worldliness. She became animated now, joining in the conversation from a desire to force it into channels that might lead to Barry. It was more difficult than she had imagined it would be, for the Sopers spoke entirely of their own adventures, and she didn't dare to make any direct allusion to Barry. So she edged round and round the subject; asking questions, laughing at jokes; interested and eager; but it was all of no avail. That one little reference to Barry that she had overheard seemed all that she was going to hear. She began to feel rather desperate, as a shipwrecked mariner on a raft on the open sea might feel when, having sighted a distant sail and made frantic signals for help, he sees the sail going serenely on its way until it dips below the horizon and is lost from sight, taking hope with it.

The Sopers and Nigel Lyle stayed during the next act, to her intense relief, so there was still a glimpse

of sail on her horizon. She had been so intent with this question that she hadn't noticed the manner of Mr. Lyle at all, but now it was brought to her notice with a bang, for under cover of the darkness he drew his chair closer to hers, and with his face so near that she felt his breath on the back of her neck, he whispered:

"Do you know, you're the most frightfully beautiful girl I've met for years?"

Judith was so completely astonished that she turned quickly and only just avoided rubbing noses with the ardent young man.

"Don't deny it," he went on quickly.

She couldn't help laughing slightly.

"How can I deny it?" she retorted. "For all I know you may have met nothing but cross-eyed girls, with sticky-out teeth and no chins! And I'm certainly quite *frightfully* more beautiful than that!" She was in excited spirits now, and the words came quickly. She felt his laugh against her ear.

"Well, that's my ice-pick remark," he drawled.

"I don't quite follow."

"My stock opening," he explained, "specially designed to break ice at a single blow."

She laughed again.

"Do you always use it?"

"Invariably—if the girl is worth it. Don't say: 'And am I?' in an *ingénue* way, I implore you."

"Shouldn't dream of it." Judith's tone was flatly practical.

"Thanks. The ice being broken, I think we've plunged in very neatly, don't you?"

"I hadn't noticed that I'd done anything at all."

"Oh, you have! You've inspired me."

Nigel Lyle managed this fooling rather charmingly, and Judith enjoyed it.

"I shall probably begin talking poetry to you before long," he threatened.

"Not here," she implored him. "You'll disturb the show and make people furious with us."

"Well come and dance at Cassim's with me tomorrow evening, or is this too sudden?"

"Much too sudden!" she replied crisply and at once.

"Curses! What about the evening after?"

"Still too sudden."

"Well when am I going to start the poetry if I never see you?"

"*Must* you start the poetry?"

"Don't you want me to?"

"Not very much."

"Not even blank verse?"

"I . . . Oh, don't be absurd!"

The smallest silence, and then:

"D'you know a fellah called Barry? James Barry?"

And there it was again, that talismanic name! Right out of the blue! With such suddenness that Judith almost cried out aloud.

"I . . . well . . . not . . ." she stammered, all utter confusion and completely at a loss as to what to say. It didn't matter; a second later she realized that. Lyle was going on without waiting for her to speak.

"Well, he says that it's only when two people can

be absurd together from the same angle that there's any hope of their getting on."

"Yes? Who . . . Where did you meet him?" Her voice was shaking so badly that she thought he must notice it. Apparently he didn't though.

"With the Sopers in Penang."

"Oh, you were with them?"

"Their guide, philosopher and friend, I assure you. They couldn't get on without me. I have to shoo off man-eating tigers and step delicately on the heads of deadly reptiles for them. You see, they are fearful cowards and I'm brave, and so . . ."

"And was that the only odd . . . interesting thing this Mr. . . . Barry said?" she broke in, afraid that Barry would be lost again.

"All he had time for. Only saw him for about a minute. No one ever sees old Jim Barry for more than a minute at a stretch. He never stops longer in one spot than that."

"He . . . he sounds most . . . entertaining. What does he do?"

"Hunts things; explores things; discovers things."

"All by himself?"

"Entirely."

"But how . . . how do his friends keep in touch with him?"

"They don't."

"Doesn't anyone ever . . . ever write to him?" The question was so fearfully important to her that she could scarcely get it spoken.

"I tried it once."

Judith's heart leaped with hope.

"How long did the letter take to get to him?"

"I don't think it has got to him yet."

"When did you write?"

"About three years ago. You see, it struck me that as he was away so much, he was probably leaving a whole lot of good, unattached capital lying around, and I thought he might like to invest some of it in *me*. . . ."

Judith was aware that his voice was still whispering in her ear, but she had entirely lost the trend of what he was saying. Three years! And the letter hadn't found Barry yet!

"You see, it went bounding after him from one place to another, but he was always just one bound ahead. But it was all right, because he was home this summer, and I was able to touch him personally. Two hundred good pounds was the amount, and I shall probably be weighed down by the shadow of debt all the days of my life."

"But where did you . . . I mean, it seems absurd that anyone can vanish like that and not be . . . be reachable. Hasn't he some sort of an agent?"

"Yes, but an agent is but mortal like ourselves. Agents don't send on letters by forked lightning or anything of that sort, you know."

"Was it to his agents you wrote?"

"Yes."

The beating of Judith's heart seemed to drown the sound even of the big drum in the orchestra. She *must* find out who these agents were, and *where* they were. Oh, to get a message through to Barry.

"Who . . . what's their name?" She absolutely faltered the question.

"Their name? My dear, how should I remember?"

She was so disappointed that she failed altogether to notice his little endearment.

"Surely you'd remember a thing like that?" she urged him.

"But how sweetly illogical! I remember Barry and I remember that I wanted two hundred, but why should I remember the musty individuals who convey my exalted request to my dear and honoured friend? They mean nothing to me. They have no personality. They are simply a means; a process; and they don't even *work,* at that! As I've explained."

Judith could have shaken him.

"Well, I've a friend in the wilds, too," she broke out suddenly, "and I want to know how to get at him."

"Now I see a neat little bargain ahead," said Lyle, lowering his whispering voice almost to soundlessness. "Dance with me at Cassim's to-morrow, and I'll bring you the name of these agent Johnnies and you can see if they know where to find your bloke. By the way, is it a love story?"

"Oh, no, no! Just merely an acquaintance. Only I thought it would be rather fun to . . . to . . ."

"Well, what about to-morrow evening?"

"All right." The words fell abruptly.

"Good girl. Dinner first?"

"On Mr. . . . Mr. Barry's two hundred?" she demanded.

"My dear, how could you think such a thing? *That's* all gone months ago. Chiefly in my trip east with these Soper people. No, ever since I got back about three weeks ago I've been living on the honest sweat of my brow and the toil of my hands."

"Oh? What have you been doing?"

"Pawning things. Cuff-links—haven't a pair left, I assure you; tie-pins, watches, rings—deuced hard work, pawning things, let me tell you."

Judith remembered the only occasion upon which she had tried it, and the colour came into her face. How queerly lightly some people could take these things!

"It doesn't sound as if you could really afford to take anyone to dinner or to Cassim's." she said, a little gauchly.

"Afford? What does the word mean? In my bright lexicon, it simply doesn't occur," he answered.

She laughed shortly, with a feeling that she had been schoolgirlish and silly.

"All right; dinner first. Where?"

"I'll call for you if you'll let me know . . ."

"No; I'd rather meet you."

"Madrid?"

"No!" That came quickly, roundly, positively.

"Rather a mausoleum, isn't it? What about Gendini's?"

"Where is it?"

He explained and it was arranged.

It was so entirely foreign to Judith's nature to make a date of this sort on such short notice that she had an unpleasant cheap feeling the moment the arrangement was concluded. She never could get into the light and easy modern way with regard to these things.

"Still, I had tea with James Barry and promised to meet him again a year hence," she argued to herself. But that was different. She knew it was. James

Barry was different, to begin with. This young man Lyle was out for a passing hour with a girl who had rather caught his volatile fancy. No great harm in him, still . . .

But if it meant finding some means of getting in touch with Barry, she felt that she would have made a dozen such dates with a dozen different men, no matter how cheap it made her feel.

She had a feeling that Barry was the one human being in all the world who might be effective against Jason. She didn't know in the least how; she just felt that it was so. And there is no reasoning against, and no reasoning needed for, such feelings as these.

She became aware suddenly that Jason's dark eyes were fixed upon her from the far side of the box. Through the dimness she saw his face, quiet, sardonic, but still with that subtle suggestion of humour in it. As if some secret thought was amusing him in a dark and twisted way. Her heart gave a startled leap of fear, but he said nothing and the evening went through to a finish with no further incident.

Judith was in a fever of anxiety all the next day lest Jason should order her to do something that would force her to abandon her meeting with Lyle. But her fears were groundless; he scarcely saw her next day at all, and in the evening she was able to fulfil the all-important engagement. Dinner at Gendini's was a sophisticated affair, with Lyle doing all the talking in his suavest drawl and Judith trying not to make it too apparent that she was living for the moment when she should have the name and address of Barry's agents safely in her own keeping. He tan-

talized her by refusing to let her have them until the bargain to dance at Cassim's had been carried out.

"Do you think I shouldn't carry out my side of it if you let me have them now?" she asked indignantly.

Lyle looked at her across one of Gendini's most discreet little tables for two and shook his sleek fair head.

"No," he said. "I should guess that your desperate fidelity to your given word borders almost on the immoral." He got that off in his best and most drawly style.

"Do you think, then, that one needn't always keep a bargain?" She asked the question a little eagerly, but knew as she asked it that the opinion of this young man could never really influence her.

"You must always keep any bargains that you make with *me,*" he replied, wagging a long, thin finger at her. "And then it doesn't matter what you do about the rest."

"Yes"—she drew back—"I thought you'd say something of that sort. Something that doesn't really *mean* anything at all."

"But my dear!" he protested. "Why should it be necessary to mean anything?"

"Don't call me my dear," she answered with a touch of nervousness. "And I *do* mean that," she added.

He laughed delightedly.

"You're most refreshing, Miss Connor. And as a reward I'm going to give you that stupid agent's address now; this very moment; just to prove that my faith in you is simple, unspoiled, and pathetic."

He produced a slip of paper from his waistcoat

pocket and gave it to her. She took it quickly, trying hard not to appear too eager; read it and had it all, name and address in detail, by heart, in a moment. Her brain seemed simply to absorb it and stow it away, complete, in her memory. This was the open sesame to James Barry; to help; to sympathy; to understanding. She set no limit to the ability of James Barry to help her through her maddening, degrading predicament. She was so happy now that she danced the evening through with Lyle light-heartedly; almost enthusiastically; and went home not much before midnight, rejoicing.

She tried to begin a letter to Barry before she went to bed, but reaction set in then and she found herself too utterly fatigued to be able to string words together coherently. So she undressed, started the geyser, refreshed her tired self in an unusually luxurious depth of hot water, and crept into bed almost aching with a delicious sense of well-being that came chiefly from renewed hope.

She overslept next morning and had a scramble to get to the office on time. So it was not until the luncheon hour that she had another chance to begin her letter to Barry. Hiding herself in a corner of a tea-shop, she put a writing-pad on the table beside her coffee-and-egg lunch, and began.

And then turned a page and began again. And then again.

It was a terribly difficult letter to write, she found. On the strength of that one meeting in a Hertfordshire rose-garden, she was more or less suggesting that this man, a wanderer by nature, should return at the earliest possible moment and help her out of

a difficulty she could not explain, nor even definitely allude to.

What right had she to suggest that this stranger should help her at all? What right to suggest that he should abandon whatever mission he was engaged upon at the time to help her? To help her about what? That she couldn't tell him. Dared not tell him even if she had shared Nigel Lyle's easy theories concerning the given word. She could only write guardedly; in hints; in little subtle suggestions that the matter was really important; desperate; vital. But how convey all that? How make it convincing? How make it even reasonable?

To ask help wasn't easy; to ask it in a matter she couldn't explain was downright difficult. When the lunch hour was up, the letter was still not much more than just begun, and she carried it back to the office with her, disappointed and discouraged.

Round about four o'clock came a sudden summons from Jason, and she had to go to his room.

The moment she was there and had closed the door he said, without looking up from his desk:

"Make me some tea, please."

Much surprised, because she had never had to do this service for him before, she set about it quietly, and presently put a neat little tray of tea and biscuits beside him on his desk.

"Get another cup and have yours with me," he said.

She hesitated; then said:

"Miss Paskey will have mine ready for me by the time I go back, thank you."

"Do as you're told," was all he said.

She obeyed him, and sat round the corner of the desk from him, and drank her tea.

"Have a biscuit," he said next.

"No, thanks."

"Why not?"

"I don't like macaroons."

"I tell you to have a biscuit," he repeated doggedly.

She looked at him squarely.

"Macaroons make me sick," she said.

"Be sick then."

With the address of James Barry's agents safely in her possession, even if to write to him was difficult, she was feeling more brave than she had felt for months.

"That's silly, isn't it?" she said quietly. "Silly and childish."

Their eyes were meeting steadfastly. Judith would not allow hers to falter, even though his were at their darkest and cruellest. His eyes were always cruel when he was testing his power over her. Dark, cold, watchful and cruel.

"Are you going to do as I tell you?" he said at last.

"You can't really want to make me sick," she replied.

"Get up."

She rose.

"Go to the door."

She obeyed, turning and facing him across the wide, light room.

"Kneel."

She hesitated.

"Kneel," he said again.

Still she hesitated; her colour high and hot. He was leaning forward across his desk, one big hand closed to a fist upon it; his mouth tense and working oddly; eyes darker than ever. Without relaxing his position, his left hand went to the drawer in his desk.

Judith paled and dropped to her knees. . . . A moment of palpitating silence and then his laugh: big, boyish, exultant.

"It works," he said. "It still works. Get up and don't make a fool of yourself. Suppose anyone should come in and see you kneeling there!" He jeered her in an odd, teasing, almost big-brother manner, his laugh running through his words.

She stood up again, looking at him more in amazement than in anger or resentment. His power was to him as a wonderful piece of mechanism is in the hands of a boy. He had to keep touching the spring to see that it still worked. He was entranced by it; it was the most enchanting thing he knew; a magic thing of which only he knew the secret. A form of madness, of course, her thoughts went on, as she walked slowly back to the desk. It must be; there could be no other explanation of it. In that moment Judith almost pitied him.

"Sit down," he told her.

She obeyed, and nothing more was said of the biscuit.

Out of a silence that had endured some time, he suddenly said:

"Have a good time with Lyle last night?"

She coloured richly and her heart gave a throb. How had he known of that? She answered as calmly as she could.

"Quite."

"I didn't know you cared much for night clubs and that sort of thing."

"I don't."

"Yet you had a good time?"

Again she said simply:

"Quite."

"You like young Lyle?"

"Like? Well, he's amusing."

"You don't like me, do you?"

Her eyes met his straightly.

"No."

"You wouldn't have a good time with me?"

"No."

"Every minute of time you spend with me is a misery to you."

"Every minute of it."

"Queer, isn't it?" His tone was conversational. They might have been talking of some quite impersonal subject.

"It doesn't seem queer to me; it seems only natural," she answered steadily.

"Why? Why shouldn't you like me? Why shouldn't you have a good time with me? I'm a considerably more worth-while individual than Nigel Lyle. I've worked harder; achieved more," he argued interestedly.

"Yes," she said slowly. "It seems extraordinary that a man who has so much force of character should have so little control of himself."

"But I have a great deal of control of myself," he countered.

"I don't agree. I think you are very self-indulgent."

"But I'm not. I have too much respect for physical fitness, I assure you."

She looked at him with something new in her eyes at that; appraisingly; as if she were seeing him suddenly from an entirely new angle. She had seen that he was physically powerful, but had always regarded it from the muscular point of view. Now she realized that this impression of power was given not only by sheer strength but by good, clean health as well. His dark skin was as preciously clear as a girl's; his fine teeth as exquisitely kept; his dark eyes as bright. Yes, here was a man to whom fitness was a highly valued thing. He spoke again.

"I don't drink; I eat moderately; I smoke, but not a lot. As for love, I do not find it of absorbing interest. I put in two good hours of hard riding every morning before I start my day's work; I swim, fence, walk, run, and I do *not* dance at night clubs with utterly un-worth-while people."

Yes, she could see that all this was true. Looking at him as she never had looked at him before, she saw that his worship of his own fitness was an ardent and a genuine thing. What was it then that made him the cruel man he was? *Was* it madness? A kink in that otherwise clear-functioning brain? Or was it just a patch of the savage in his nature that had come down through the ages from some far-distant ancestor who must rule by force or go under? A patch that had come down to him "neat" as it were; undiluted by the ideals of civilization? Or was there truth in the old idea of possession by evil powers? That a man was possessed of devils was the old-

time explanation of any violent manifestation that could not otherwise be accounted for. Thinking deeply, she said:

"Isn't there something besides physical fitness? Some other sort of fitness?"

"No other sort that counts, that I'm aware of," was his ready answer.

"Isn't there such a thing as fitness of soul? Of spirit? Yes, that's what I mean: spiritual fitness. Isn't that a real and important thing?"

His answer was short, scornful and richly illuminating:

"Highfalutin'."

So that was it, she thought; that was the explanation of this man. He had no belief, no reverence for anything that was beyond material fact. He would keep his body fit and strong and let his soul wither within him. Highfalutin'! Said as he said it, the expression was full of self-revelation.

"I see," she said slowly, looking at him with eyes of wonder that such a man as he really breathed the air of heaven; walked in the light of day and was a fellow-creature in the sight of men. "I see, but do you know, you're entirely wrong? You may wield your power, inflict your punishments, but ultimately you will find that *you* are weak and small; that *you* are wrong. It isn't strong or clever to use power as you use it. It is weakness; because you are so small-minded that you cannot see any better use to put your power to. Do you realize that?" She spoke very slowly, very seriously; as if the words were so sincerely meant that they came of themselves.

He laughed; that big, rough laugh of his, that had seemed to Judith, the first time she heard it, to be the cruellest sound in the world.

"Let that ultimate day come when it likes!" he said, with the swagger of supreme self-confidence in his voice.

"It *will* come, you know. It *will* come," she said earnestly.

"Well, what does it matter to you if it does?"

"It's a terrible thing to . . . to see anyone so soulless," she answered on a quickly drawn breath of deep feeling. In this moment she seemed to forget that *she* was the chosen victim of his ruthless power; her impulse, curiously enough, was purely to save *him* from it.

He leaned towards her suddenly.

"Do *you* find my power so insignificant a thing?" he demanded.

She started back in her chair.

"No. It is a terrible thing to me," she said in a low voice. "It is a *killing* thing to me."

"I generally find that sentiments such as you profess are mostly talk. Take some letters, please." This was added in his typically brusque manner.

A good deal relieved that the personal should have given way to the prosaic, Judith prepared to take the letters, and he started on the first one. Judith always admired him for his dictation; it was so fluent; he seemed never to have to pause and grope for words as Albert Jenkins had always done. The fitting word seemed to present itself inevitably. He kept her working until nearly five, and then rose and stretched his mighty figure.

"I'm going to call it a day," he said. "But you'll get those done before *you* leave."

"Yes, sir."

He got into his overcoat and gathered hat and gloves.

She rose to go back to her room.

"By the way," he said quite casually, "how long have you known James Barry?"

Her heart seemed to plunge.

"N-not long," she stammered.

"I asked *how* long."

She had to force herself to look at him. What she saw in his face was not reassuring. His eyes were gleaming; hard as steel. He had been saving this for her; nursing it up within him gloatingly to spring on her.

"Since June," she said at last. "How did you know I knew him?" That was a cry of hopelessness that nothing concerning her could be kept from him.

"Quite simple. Heard you talking of him to young Lyle at the theatre the other night. No one who was quite a stranger to him could have been so interested in the name and address of his agents."

"I am very little *more* than a stranger to him," she said miserably, and she turned towards the door, longing to get away.

His voice stopped her.

"Wait a minute, please. I have quite a few questions to ask about James Barry."

She turned, dispiritedly.

"Well?"

"Where did you meet him?"

"In a tea-garden in the country."

"Exactly where?"

"What right have you to ask?"

"No right perhaps; just that stupid little *power*, that's all." His tone was mocking. "Again, exactly where?"

"At Chemming Green in Hertfordshire."

"Had you met him before?"

"No."

"Sure?"

"Quite."

"Who introduced you?"

"No one. We just—met."

"And had tea together?"

"Yes."

"You—picked each other up, to put it quite vulgarly?"

"Yes. Oh, yes, if you like!" she cried tiredly.

"I am surprised again. I didn't think you cared for night clubs and I certainly didn't think you would easily make friends with strange men."

"I don't. It just—happened."

"Quite romantic."

"Oh no; nothing of that sort. Just a decent man and a quite ordinary girl who found each other interesting."

"Deeply? Or passingly?"

"We scarcely had time to judge of that."

"Then that one meeting has been your only one?"

"Yes."

"Did you plan to meet again?"

"I won't answer!" she cried fiercely.

"Yes, you will."

She closed her eyes and drew a breath. Then looked at him again.

"Yes, we planned to meet again."

"When?"

Word by word the whole story of her meeting with Barry was being dragged from her; word by word she was having to surrender something that had always been rather preciously secret to her. Not in a romantic way, if you take the word romance to deal in nothing but the love between man and woman. But as something that had been undiluted pleasure to her; something the power of which to strengthen had lasted. And now to have to give it up to this ruthless monster of a man! To him of all others! To think of it and know it was shared by *him!* But what was she to do against him? She was the present victim of his power, however much he might be its ultimate one! The importance of that ultimate day seemed now to dwindle by contrast with this present moment.

"In June," she said at last.

"Just one year ahead, eh?" he answered.

"One year exactly."

"To the very date."

"To the very date."

"And what *is* the date to be precise?"

"You are fiendish!" she cried, the shake of hot, angry, impotent tears in her voice.

"The date please."

"The twenty-sixth."

He had it all now; the whole of her lovely little secret comfort! Ruthlessly he had torn away the gossamer of her memories; destroyed the last sweetness of her hope. . . .

"And now I'll have a look at the letter you've written him." His voice came to her through her miserable thoughts.

"That is unspeakable!" she cried.

"But then, I am. You have told me so before."

"Even *you* can't be such a cad!"

"It isn't caddishness. It's power. That power that you seem to think so little of."

"It *is* caddish to use power in such a way!"

"Power exists to be used as the possessor of it chooses. Otherwise, it isn't power. Hadn't that occurred to *you?*"

"Power exists to be used for good! Hadn't that occurred to *you?*"

"Frankly, it hadn't." He was smiling now; enjoying this playing upon his victim.

"You *can't* ask for the letters I write! You *can't!*" she protested.

"But I *have* asked for this one."

"It isn't written, anyway."

"It is begun."

"How do you know? How do you know?"

"By a most simple process of putting two and two together. Give it to me." He held out his hand.

"I won't. I will *not!*"

"You have said that about other things before. Repetition becomes merely boring."

She knew that she was beaten again and must give in, but she gave in protesting hotly; took the partly written letter from the pocket of her woollen coat and handed it to him. He took no notice of her protests; just unfolded the paper and read what she had written. She watched him; saw his eyes travel to

the end and back to the beginning again. Then he looked at her.

"You're loyal, anyway," he remarked. "You don't tell him what the bargain is between you and me. That you have sold your soul to the devil, as it were."

Her eyes met his.

"It isn't loyalty, it's fear," she confessed abruptly. "I'm afraid of you, as one *is* afraid of anyone who is utterly without mercy. Utterly inhuman."

He smiled and gave her back the letter.

"Did you imagine that Jim Barry could help you?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"I don't know. But he is strong and fine and . . . you couldn't make *him* afraid."

"You seem to have learnt a good deal about him in one short afternoon."

"Some things about some people are so obvious that one can't help knowing them at once. I don't believe it is in his nature to be afraid."

"It is in the nature of *all* men to be afraid—of something."

"He would never be afraid of another man."

"But how would that help you? It is quite a negative thing, after all."

"I have told you, I don't know. But he *could* help. And I believe he would. Perhaps simply by opposing the power of good to the power of evil." She added that slowly.

He laughed.

"Yes, I knew you'd laugh," she said sharply, "but I have faith in the power of good; a faith you will never be able to shake no matter what you do." She

held her head high and the words had a ring to them. "Good *must* conquer evil just as light, even a small light, scatters darkness."

"A good deed in a naughty world, eh? Yes, that's been said already. But in what way does Jim Barry cast so very brilliant a beam?"

She gave him a quick look.

"You know him, don't you?"

"Yes. I've known him for years."

"Then you know what the quality is in him that stands for—light."

For a moment he was silent. Then:

"You are not to write to Barry," he said very distinctly.

If he had expected a further outburst of indignation from her, he must have been surprised by what she said next. She said, not triumphantly, exultingly, but as a simple, straightforward statement of fact:

"You're afraid of him."

He laughed again, but there was a tinge of colour in his face.

"You are not to write to him," he repeated.

"I obey, of course," she replied with dignity.

"You can go, then."

She went. He had as usual beaten her in every concrete, material way, and yet she had an odd, exhilarated feeling that in some way he didn't realize, she had scored a victory.

This feeling lasted through several weeks in spite of all the torments Jason put her through. But when it was brought down it was brought down with a rush.

Chapter IX

SHE came back from lunch one blowy day in March to find the office in a condition of quivering excitement.

"Ratty's having the row of her young life with V.J.," whispered Miss Paskey, in explanation. "Listen!"

Judith listened. Even through the intervening room the voice of Miss Rattray, high and shrill and out of all control, was audible. Though what she was saying was not. Judith's heart sank.

"What's it all about?" she asked, but the answer was already at the back of her mind, thrust there and kept there, because she dared not admit it.

"Heaven above knows!" answered Miss Paskey. "But we poor mortals might give a guess, eh, Angel?"

Angela Brown agreed that they might.

"You're in for a hot time when she comes out, Judy," said Maud Taylor quietly. "Unless I'm totally out in my calculations."

"Oh, we heard your name, Connor. So little Maudie's calculations can be relied on, if you ask *me*," said Miss Paskey.

She was right. Almost as she spoke Miss Rattray appeared in the doorway, her peaky face livid, her eyes wild, her faded sandy hair clinging in wisps to

her perspiring forehead. She was shaking from head to foot and with an unconsciously dramatic gesture she pointed a trembling finger towards Judith.

"You! Judith Connor!" she said, her voice rasping out on a high, shaken note. "I'm sacked! For *you!* D'you hear me?"

Judith faced her; her eyes wide and horrified.

"Sacked! You! Oh . . . it can't be! It can't be!" she cried out.

"For you, do you hear?" the shrieking voice went on. "You're to be his new secretary! You're to have a desk in his own room! I'm sacked for you! I! who've been with him, slaved for him, for seventeen years! I'm to be thrown aside for you! Cast off as if I'm of no account, as if I'm a cheap, inefficient little clerk! But I'll get even with you! I'll get even yet! Don't imagine you can get away with this!"

Judith went to her, caught her arms, and pinned them forcibly to her sides. The little peaky face, ravaged with stormy emotion, was something quite terrible to look into, but Judith looked down right into the wild eyes, and with tense hands shook the small, weedy figure till its voice was silenced.

"Listen! I didn't do this. I didn't! Anyone who says I did is lying. I wouldn't have had it happen for the whole world! Get you the sack!" The enormity of the thing and the suspicion that she had engineered it struck her to speechlessness suddenly.

"After seventeen years! Seventeen years!" cried Miss Rattray, finding her voice again. "And you say you haven't done it!" The utter disbelief in that was patent. "Who's done it then? Answer me that. Tell me who's done it?"

"Victor Jason himself, I suppose. Listen, Ratty. Ratty dear, listen," implored Judith.

"Not to lies of that foolish sort. Everyone has seen that he's gone on you. You with your pasty white face and your wicked red mouth! Don't come to me with any lies, I tell you. Because you can't get away with them. I may be a poor old simple fool, just doing my work the best I know how; just slaving eight hours a day at my job, but I know a liar when I see one, and I know a good girl from a . . ."

Judith suddenly clapped a hand over the quivering, violent mouth. Her grey eyes blazed.

"Don't say it, Ratty. Just don't say it!" she said in a voice that sounded as if it came out between clenched teeth.

Miss Rattray struggled for freedom, darting her head from left to right, but Judith kept a hand tight over her mouth.

"Don't say it," she warned again. She was utterly unconscious of the tension in the office. Outside herself and this infuriated little woman beneath her hands, nothing and no one at this moment existed. She didn't see Miss Paskey standing beside her desk, her loose mouth sagging open in surprise; nor Angela Brown with her shrewd eyes wide and amazed; nor Maud Taylor, sorry and hurt and with that feeling of shame that comes to reticent natures when forced to witness any stark revelation of emotion. She just knew that a most terrible injustice had been hammered out at both Ratty and herself, and she was dazed, half stunned by it.

"I'll go to him. I'll see him. I'll tell him," she said. "Keep quiet. I'll *make* him . . . make . . ." Her

words petered out. She pushed past Ratty and went to Jason's room.

What happened there the waiting office never knew. But Judith came back only a few minutes later, white and stricken.

"I can't do anything," she said, and the words came so difficultly that they seemed to be almost gasped out. "I *can't* make him. He won't listen. He has no mercy. There's nothing in him I can appeal to. I can't do anything, Ratty." Her eyes, wide and dark in her colourless face, appealed to the little woman for understanding.

Ratty turned on her feverishly, and the stream of malice that started from her thin, quivering lips was something that her listeners never afterwards forgot. Judith made no protest this time; just stood straight and still, her eyes tragic, her lips a veritable "thread of scarlet," taking the verbal blows without flinching, as if she recognized Ratty's justification in dealing them.

Maud Taylor could bear it no longer.

"Ratty!" she began sharply, but Angela Brown, the shrewd and brassy blonde, caught her arm.

"No, let her get it all off her chest," she said quickly; "she deserves to be allowed to."

Understanding words; as understanding as Judith's still, white acceptance of the injured woman's blazing tirade, and they broke through the heat of the scene, suddenly cooling the molten lava of Ratty's wrath.

The abrupt silence gave them all a sense of having been pulled up with a jerk on the very edge of a

chasm, and each drew a breath of relief as at a narrow escape.

Then Ratty's voice again; cold now and deadly venomous. She eyed Judith from beneath half-lowered, pale-fringed lids.

"You refused the offer of my place, of course," she said with cruel sarcasm.

"I—*couldn't,*" replied Judith steadily.

"You told him you couldn't *dream* of taking a job away from a hard-working, efficient woman who'd held it for seventeen years. Of *course* you told him that?" The words were like knives; each with a power of its own to stab.

"I tried to. But it was no good."

"So *you* are to be Victor Jason's new secretary?"

"Yes."

"Gather round, girls, and congratulate! It's not everyone who can rise so quickly in the world, is it?" A rather ghastly laugh followed the contemptuous words. Then Ratty came a pace nearer Judith and strained her face up close to Judith's own. *"You* are to have my room; my desk; my responsibilities; my *salary. And* a desk in the chief's own room, I am given to understand."

"Yes. He told me." Judith's voice was tense.

"All done strictly by hard work! Gather round, girls! Gather round!" That ghastly laugh again, and then a break and a shooting up of flame again, as she strained even closer yet to Judith. "You . . . you . . ."

She said it this time and finished with a flash of her hand upon Judith's white cheek; a stinging slash that left red marks. Then she went into her room,

groping and stumbling like a blind thing, and slammed the door behind her.

Silence; long; complete.

Until Miss Paskey broke it.

"Poor little devil!" she said, her high, foolish voice not quite steady. "That's what *I* say. Poor little devil!" She sent a supercilious look at Judith.

Angela Brown opened her lips to speak, but Maud Taylor, with something in her face that neither of them had ever seen in it before, suddenly took the centre of the stage.

"Shut up, you two fools!" she said in a low voice of sheer, concentrated fury. "If there's any baiting of Judy here, I'll do my best to get you sacked too. Understand?" She stood staunchly before them, her usually mild brown eyes blazing.

They understood. So did Judith, and understanding brought with it, at that moment, so tremendous an emotion that she crumpled to the floor in a faint.

It was Maud Taylor who brought her to; Maud Taylor, tremendously moved and trying not to show it. When Judith was sufficiently recovered Maud insisted upon her going home, and waited for no one's permission, either.

"You go," she said briskly. "I'll do the explaining," and to herself she added, "There's more in this than meets the eye. I wish I knew what it was."

Next day Judith found that Miss Rattray's room was now hers and that a desk had been placed in Jason's room for her and that she was already fully installed as his personal secretary.

She had recovered now and was determined to meet the situation with a forehead of brass.

"It's a great rise for you," said Jason when she went to his room to begin her new duties. The gleam in his eyes was triumphant and there was—or Judith fancied there was—a trail of ironical humour in his voice.

"Yes, sir," she said quietly.

"Seven pounds a week will be your pay," he added.

"Thank you, sir."

"And you will work for me exclusively."

"I quite understand."

"The other girls will be under your control. Now go through these letters, please, and refer anything you can't deal with to me."

Judith took the basketful of letters to her desk and sat down.

Seven pounds a week; it was a tremendous rise. And she would use it, too. She would use everything in the situation that was usable, just as she had used the bracelet. Seven pounds a week! There was a lot she could do with that. One tremendous thing, at least.

When she received the first seven pounds she went straight as a line to Miss Rattray's flat at the back of Tottenham Court Road. She had found the address in Jason's address book. Ratty herself had always been secretive about it; perhaps because the street was not too savoury either in aspect or reputation, or perhaps for reasons entirely her own.

The flat, Judith found, was a ground floor one, and in answer to her ring a tall, thin, loose-boned youth opened the door and said ungraciously:

"Well?"

Judith looked up into his face. There was not

much light, for the hall behind him was in darkness and there was no street lamp near, but she got the impression of dark hair and an unkempt, rather forbidding appearance. The impression was helped by a surly voice which was not yet wholly come into its man's estate.

"Is Miss Rattray in, please?" she asked.

"No, she isn't. Who is it?" replied the youth bluntly.

"My name is Connor. Judith Connor. Could I come in and wait? I want to see her very importantly."

"I know who you are," he said. "And I don't think Miss Rattray is likely to want to see you."

"I *must* see her. I must. Please, please let me come in and wait."

Her earnestness made the boy hesitate, then he drew back into the little hall and said:

"Very well. Only I don't know how long she'll be."

"I don't mind how long I wait, if I'm not in the way. So long as I see her."

She followed him into a little living-room, groping after him until he put on the light. Then he said:

"You can sit down." He indicated a chair and she sat down. He was going to leave, but at the door he turned.

"I know who you are," he said again. "You're the girl who got my aunt turned out of her job. You are, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am. But it wasn't my fault. It honestly wasn't."

He laughed unbelievingly.

"She'd been in that job a long time to be turned out like that."

"I know," cried Judith, distressed. "I think it was a dastardly thing to do."

"Well, *you* did it; you ought to know," he put in roughly.

Judith didn't answer that. What was the use? She couldn't explain and a mere denial went for nothing.

"You're her nephew, aren't you?" she said instead.

"Yes."

"I've heard of you," she said, and attempted a faint smile.

"Oh! What have you heard?" he asked, and there was a note of interest in his voice. He had his share of vanity then, this boy, thought Judith.

"I've been told that you're awfully clever; at some sort of wireless, I think it was."

"Yes, wireless chiefly," he said, and now he came back into the room. "Who told you?" he asked.

"One of the girls at the office."

"Then my aunt *does* speak of me?"

"I believe she is very proud of you."

The boy coloured up to his hair, and his surliness lifted. Judith, looking up at him, saw then that his was a sensitive face, rather weak about the mouth and chin, but with dark, intense eyes and a high, clever, idealistic forehead. He was looking down at her now, as if he were really seeing her, thinking about her, for the first time, and as if he were suddenly taken aback by what he saw.

"You know," he said at last, "you don't look like the sort of girl to do anyone out of a job in such a cruel way."

"I'm glad you think that!" cried Judith, eager to make friends with him. "Awfully glad, because it's true; I wouldn't have had it happen for the world! Indeed, I wouldn't."

"Then why *did* it happen?"

"Just because I couldn't help it."

"You've benefited by it, anyway."

"Against my will."

The boy was looking at her thoughtfully.

"That's silly," he said finally. "Those things can't happen against your will."

"You say that because you don't know. Because you simply *do not know.*" Her vehemence evidently struck through to him, for he said:

"You certainly don't *look* as if you'd do a dirty thing like that."

"Thank you, Mr. . . ." She paused.

"My name's Rattray, too," he said. "Son of my aunt's brother."

"I see."

"But my people are both dead . . . ages ago."

"That's awful rough luck."

"My aunt is tremendously good to me. Always has been. That's why I hate you for . . ."

"But you *don't* hate me for that," broke in Judith. "Because you don't believe I did it."

"You certainly don't look . . ." began the boy, doubtful and troubled. There was something about him, an air of pathetic loneliness, a look of being utterly out of touch with the rest of the world that attracted Judith.

"Now look here, Mr. Rattray, I want you to do something for me, will you?"

"What is it?"

"I want you to be guided by your instinct about me. Your instinct tells you that I'm not the sort of girl to do a low-down thing of this sort. Well, I want you to trust that instinct. Even if it seems to go against all reason. Will you?"

He stood, tall, loose-shouldered, cubbish, looking down at her with those curious, intent eyes of his.

"If my aunt had never told me . . ." he began.

"Well, pretend your aunt never *did* tell you," interrupted Judith. "If it weren't for that, what would you think of me?"

"I'd say you were beautiful through and through," he said quite simply.

She drew back, and a sudden impulse to laugh was killed by a stronger impulse to cry. It was expressed in an odd little shaken sound that escaped her and was quickly caught back.

"I wish I could deserve that," she said soberly. "But I can't pretend to. Only I . . ."

Suddenly he came close to her.

"If you could swear to me that you couldn't help what has happened, I'd believe it," he said.

She didn't stop then to think what an extraordinary scene this was; what unusual things were being said; what unexpected emotions aroused. She said eagerly:

"I can swear it and I do. Oh, it's so important that you should believe in me!"

"Then I do," said the boy slowly.

"I just can't thank you. Will you help me with her?"

"Yes. I don't think she'll believe in you. She hasn't

got *faith* like I have. I can believe in things like . . . like anything," he went on. "I have to. It's the only thing that makes you able to do anything."

"Belief in yourself?" asked Judith.

"I've heaps of that. You see, when you've got a real *spark,* you're bound to know it. I've got a spark. And I know it. And if I didn't believe in it, well, what good would it be to me or anyone else?"

"By spark, do you mean genius?"

"Well, you can call it what you like; it's all the same. It's the thing that makes you know you're right when everyone says you're wrong; the thing that makes you go on trying to do a thing when everyone says you're a fool and wasting your time. I call it a spark, because it lights up that bit of your brain which no one but you can ever understand."

Judith was silent. There was a curious enthusiasm in the boy's face; an odd gleam in his eyes; a little trembling of his lips. She had thought him loutish and uncouth, but there was something about him now that changed him utterly. If he had a spark, as he called it, it was certainly lighting up his face at this moment.

"What a queer, uncanny boy," she was suddenly saying to herself.

"So I can believe in lots of things that other people can't," he finished up, rather quaintly, and so much like a quite small schoolboy that she wondered how old he was. She didn't ask because he seemed altogether too big for such a question.

The sound of the front door being opened and shut told them that Miss Rattray had returned. Judith sat suddenly straight and tense and the boy said quickly:

"I'll help you," and he went to the door and called into the hall. "I'm here, aunt, and Miss Connor has come to see you."

Miss Rattray pushed past him at that, and confronted Judith. Judith rose.

"Who said that you could come here?" demanded Ratty.

"I came for a very special reason," said Judith.

"Well I tell you to *go*—for a very special reason! I don't want to hear a word more from you, Judith Connor."

"Aunt," put in the boy, laying a hand on her arm, "I don't think there's any need to . . ."

Miss Rattray turned on him, shaking off his hand.

"What do you know about it, David?"

"I just don't think there's any need . . ." The boy coloured painfully, trying hard to express what he meant, and failing.

"You run along now and mess about with your wireless for a bit," broke in his aunt. "I can manage Miss Connor."

The boy looked at Judith and then at his aunt and went out of the room, reluctantly. Miss Rattray turned back to Judith.

"Come to flourish your week's money before my eyes, perhaps?" she said sneeringly. "It's pay-day."

"No. To give you your half." Judith's hands were shaking as she opened her bag, took out an envelope and held it out. "Please will you take it?"

Miss Rattray backed away from her as if she thought she must suddenly have gone mad.

"Take money from you?" she said through her teeth.

"No, don't hate me so. *Don't,* Ratty! I'm in awful difficulties. You don't understand. If you did you'd see . . . you'd know . . . how dreadful this is for me."

"And what about *me?*"

"Yes, yes, it's terrible. I realize it. I do indeed. Have you . . . have you got a new job or anything in view?"

"How am I to get a new job at my age? Who wants a woman like me around an office when there are girls like you in the market? I haven't got a white skin and red lips! I'm old and I'm faded and I'm sallow; and my hair's going grey. What hope have I got of a new job?" Miss Rattray was speaking quietly now, with a sort of controlled venom that was worse, far worse, than any hysterical storming.

"You're ten times better at your job than I can be. Ten times more experienced," protested Judith.

"Yes, and why? Because I'm more than twice your age." Ratty laughed bitterly. "And you come to me with *money!*"

"It's your money; not mine. I'm only asking you to take what is your own."

"What's he paying you?"

"Seven."

"What did he pay you before?"

"Three-ten."

"And how much are you proposing to give me?"

"Three-ten. The difference, you see."

Miss Rattray looked at her steadily.

"Every week for as long as I'm in your job!"

Miss Rattray turned away and then back again.

"Sit down," she said shortly.

Judith obeyed and Miss Rattray sat down, too, by a little table, leaning one elbow upon it.

"Now then, why are you proposing to do this?" she demanded.

"Because I can't touch the money myself; it's yours; I've no right to it. I was engaged by Victor Jason at three-ten a week and that is my rightful wage. Everything above that is yours."

"He only paid me five."

"Oh, then three-ten will be something near it! You *will* take it, won't you?"

"No."

"But why? Things are too difficult these days for such pride."

"I'm not going to be beholden to a woman like you."

Their eyes met.

"What do you mean by that?" asked Judith quietly.

"You know very well what I mean."

The look between them held steadily.

"You're wrong," said Judith.

"You're lying," retorted Miss Rattray.

"I'm not."

"I know Victor Jason."

"Evidently, you don't."

Miss Rattray broke the look to turn away and laugh. It was a very bitter sound.

"I know what everyone thinks, and of course it's inevitable that they *should* think it, but you are wrong and they are wrong," went on Judith.

Miss Rattray turned back and leaned towards her, pointing a finger at her.

"You can sit there and say that, solemnly?"

"I could say it *sacredly,* if need be."

Something in her voice evidently shook Miss Rattray.

"Victor Jason is not your lover?"

Judith's eyes didn't falter; neither did her voice.

"No," she said clearly.

Miss Rattray drew a breath. Judith added:

"Moreover, Victor Jason isn't in the smallest degree attracted by me."

"I can't believe it! I *can't!*" Miss Rattray's voice was no more than a whisper.

"It is true."

"What is it between the two of you, then?"

"I can't tell you that."

"Why not?"

"There are reasons."

"I'll *bet* there are!" Miss Rattray's voice was bitter again.

"No, Ratty, *dear* Ratty, don't take that tone. I'm telling you the truth. Every bit of it that I can. Every bit I *dare.* Have a little mercy on me."

There was a silence. Then:

"I'll take the money," said Miss Rattray abruptly.

"You really will?" Judith's eyes lighted up. "Oh, I'm so grateful to you!" She pressed the envelope into Miss Rattray's thin, small, capable hands.

Miss Rattray laughed shortly.

"It's mine by right, as you say," she said as if she had to excuse herself for taking it.

"Absolutely," agreed Judith.

"Besides, I need it. D'you hear that? I need it. I, who've worked for that beast all these years!"

"It's wretchedly unjust."

"I've always had David to care for, you see."

"I know."

"I don't suppose I've done much for him, but I've done whatever I could." The little woman sat twisting the envelope in her fingers, looking down at it resentfully; speaking resentfully too.

"It must have been a tremendous responsibility."

"Such a queer boy to deal with."

"Yes, I should imagine that."

"He's clever, you know."

"Oh, yes."

"But difficult. Deadly difficult."

Silence again. Judith rose, stood looking down at Miss Rattray for a moment, then said:

"I'll go now. Thank you most awfully for the way you've taken this. It's . . . it's *big* of you. I don't suppose you can ever like me or be really friends with me; I don't expect it. . . ."

Miss Rattray looked up swiftly.

"I hate you!" she said quite simply.

Judith was startled by the abrupt avowal.

"I'm sorry."

"If I don't know all there is between you and Jason, you don't know all there is between *me* and Jason."

"No, I don't. There's something, I can see that. Always have. He's hurt you in some way, but I don't know how. He's an utterly ruthless man and I can believe anything of him."

"It's a good thing you realize that. I suppose you think now that he has been *my* lover?"

"I don't. I know that with Victor Jason the normal

explanations are not the only ones. I've learnt that."

"Anything he wants, he gets."

"That can't go on for ever."

"It doesn't need to, as far as I'm concerned." Miss Rattray's tone was sombre. "He's done me all the damage he can." She rose quickly and stood very straight. "But I don't forget," she said in a slow, weighty way. "Not in a hundred years could I forget!"

Judith looked at her, troubled badly. She didn't know what to say, and before she could decide upon anything, Miss Rattray added, "Don't think *you'll* get off, either."

"What are you going to do to me, Ratty?"

Judith's voice held a note of entreaty. Miss Rattray laughed.

"I don't need to do anything. *He'll* do it."

Judith drew a breath and a great fear swept over her. The words were so ominous.

"I've made what amends I can to you," she said in a low voice.

Miss Rattray held out the envelope clenched tight in her fist.

"Money!" she said, and all the scorn in the world was in the word.

"I know; it's nothing; it doesn't make up . . . repay . . ." Judith's voice petered out and she turned away dispiritedly. Ratty was armoured in steel, there was no getting in touch with her. And yet she had a feeling that there must be a chink in the armour somewhere that would let her in to the passionate little woman's softer self. If only people could really know each other! If only she could really

understand what was at the root of Ratty's blazing feeling against her; if only Ratty could know all that troubled *her*. . . . Just for a moment to be able to change souls and feel and think and suffer and hope and fear and love and hate as someone else!

She uttered an almost inaudible good-bye, turned away, groped through the dark hall and went out into the street, depressed to the very depths.

Hurried footsteps coming after her made her turn, and David Rattray approached her.

"I didn't do much," he said apologetically. "Did she put you through it?"

"No. It's all right. She doesn't understand and I can't explain. But it was all right."

"I meant to stand up to her. But I never can." The boy spoke regretfully.

"And please never do on my account," said Judith quickly. "That would be the worst of all, if you should have any sort of upset with her because of me."

"She's such a good woman. It needs a lot of faith sometimes to believe in aunt, but I can do it."

A crazy impulse to laugh seized Judith. This boy did put things so queerly.

"I know you're right too," she said. "She's had more to bear than anyone . . ." She broke off. "Good night, David. I'm awfully glad you believe in me." She held out her hand and the boy took it. His hand, she noticed, was quite hot and sticky, and he stammered his good night, and turned and went back to the house at a run.

Chapter X

THERE was just one aspect of her new position that Judith could draw comfort from: she was no longer continually with the other girls in the office. To have a room to herself; even to be at her desk in Jason's own room, was a relief. She guessed that, if it hadn't been before, it must now be an accepted thing that Jason was her lover, but at least she was not always where she could see this belief in the other girls' eyes. Each week she sent three pounds ten in notes by registered post to Miss Rattray, and each week she paid to Jason the little contribution towards the purchase price of her freedom. But looking back at the months that had gone since she made her strange bargain with him; and forward, over the months that must pass before the bargain could be completed, how terribly long and slow they seemed! Three hundred pounds took an awful lot of paying off.

If only she could quicken the process, and hasten on her freedom. It occurred to her one day that she could at least help it along with the money she had got from the sale of the bracelet. The idea sent a big hope leaping up within her.

That night she counted out the money. Ten pounds of it had dribbled away to Pat, but the rest was there. Sixty-five pounds. That was a very big proportion of at least one of the three hundred. How should

she do it? A little each week, doubling her present rate, so that she would be paying off two years' debt in one year? Jason would think her able to do that now that she was being paid so much more, for, of course, she had not told him of the money she handed over to Miss Rattray each week. Yes, that would be the best way to do it.

She approached him about it and he received the idea with indifference, merely saying:

"By all means. It doesn't matter to me."

So now each week she drew from that little store, and the thought that she was knocking a year at least from her term of imprisonment in his power, was uplifting.

But one afternoon on going back to the office after lunch, she was instantly aware of a curious gleam in Jason's eyes, and stopped short, just inside the room, looking at him. He beckoned her.

"Come here," he said.

She went to him; looked down quickly, her attention caught by something on the desk before him.

It was the bracelet she had sold, in its little leather case, the diamonds winking wickedly in the spring sunshine. She drew a breath.

"Well?" she questioned him.

"Oh, nothing," he replied casually. "Put it on and wear it, that's all."

She obeyed, angry with herself for the shaking of her hands.

"Paying me back with my own money, eh?" he laughed. "Did I tell you to sell the bracelet?"

"You didn't tell me not to," she flashed back quickly, defensively.

"Caught me napping, didn't you? D'you know it never occurred to me that you'd sell it?"

"I needed the money. I thought I was justified in *using* the situation in any way I could. I still think that. And I always *shall* use it, in every single way I can."

"Yes, I realize you will. I'll have to tighten things up a bit, shan't I?"

"I shall always find some little loophole that will help," she boasted doggedly and defiantly. "How did you trace the bracelet?"

"I didn't—some little Jew dealer sold it back to the firm where I got it, and they notified me, thinking I might be interested. I was."

"I see. Well now I suppose I'm not to be allowed to pay you more each week?"

"Oh yes you are! Towards the bracelet. I had to buy it all over again."

"But towards my freedom?"

"You can do that from your extra salary." He looked at her and laughed.

Judith turned away and went to her desk quickly. He said nothing more, and next day she brought him the whole of the remaining bracelet money.

He counted it out and looked up at her.

"Yes, but I had to pay two hundred to get the bracelet back for you," he observed.

"For me?" she cried. "I loathe the thing!"

He shoved the money carelessly aside.

"Oh well, you can put it against the three hundred if you like," he said, and he wrote a receipt for the amount.

She thanked him, almost with warmth.

A day or two later he asked her why she didn't hand over all her extra salary each week and get the debt cleared off in that way. He suggested it to her in a practical manner that for a moment put her off her guard. She answered that she had uses for her extra salary, and he said no more, but the silence was of a quality suddenly to strike her with a sense of chill, and she looked across from where she sat at her desk to where he sat at his. In his eyes was that gleam she knew. There had been intention in his suggestion then! Her heart quickened. Had he found out about Ratty?

He had; and she was in panic again. But he was in a curiously amiable mood lately, apparently, for he raised no objection to her giving Ratty the weekly three pounds ten. Merely said:

"The money's yours. You can do what you like with it." And after a moment, "Is Ratty friendly with you?"

"Not very."

He laughed; that brutal laugh of his.

"Poor old Ratty."

Judith was flaming with indignation at once.

"It was a dastardly thing to do!" she cried hotly. "To turn her away. After all the years she had been with you. . . ."

"Well, she's getting three-ten a week and not having to work for it," he retorted.

"That only galls her."

"It would be kind of mean, then, to forbid you to pay her the money?" His tone was jeering.

"It would be *like* you," she retorted.

He laughed again.

"Well, don't worry, I'm not going to." He let it go at that and got back to business.

One day as Judith was leaving the office she found David Rattray waiting for her at the corner of Robsart Street. She was utterly surprised to see him, and showed it. He was curiously humble in apologizing for being there, and explained shamefacedly.

"Don't be angry, Miss Connor," he entreated. "I simply had to see you again. Do you mind if I walk a little way with you?"

"Of course I shall like you to," she answered heartily, sorry for the poor, awkward youth.

They walked down the street and turned into Southampton Row. David didn't speak, but on glancing at him, Judith found that he was looking down at her from his lanky height with an expression in his eyes that made her think of a hungry dog. Suddenly he said, confessionally:

"I've waited for you before."

"Have you? I've never seen you."

"No. I took care you shouldn't. Thought you might be . . . wild with me."

"Why should I be? Was it anything special you wanted to see me about?"

"Awfully special!" The words broke from him violently, and he added "To *me.*"

That left a silence, which Judith didn't know how to break.

"I only came just to see you, those other times," he went on. "Just to look at you. But to-day I simply had to speak to you. Miss Connor, would you have tea with me? I know it's late for tea, but . . . if you *could* . . ." He stopped.

Judith wanted to get home, but there was something pathetic about the boy which touched her.

"I'd like to very much," she said.

She saw that he coloured hotly and that his eyes brightened and that he tried to say something appreciative, but could only get out "thank you" on a sort of gasp, as if he were overwhelmed.

They turned into a tea-shop and sat down opposite each other. He asked her what she would have, and ordered it with a kind of eagerness that gave her a feeling of being old and experienced and rather jaded. He was so amazingly young.

She shook off the feeling, laughing inwardly at herself, and began to speak of his work. What was he doing? How were his ideas going? And so on until she had him talking easily. He was full of enthusiasm and with a spirit crying out for sympathy and understanding. He had been a lonely child, with no closer tie than his aunt, and it was as a lonely child that Judith always thought of him. He was going away soon, on his first voyage as wireless operator on a big private yacht.

"I do my twenty-five a minute, you know. You wouldn't think I could do anything quick to look at me, would you? But I'm all right when it comes to Morse. And in my spare time I can go on with my experiments. I've got to earn something and get off aunt's hands."

"Your aunt will miss you," said Judith.

"Yes, but she's got other things to think about. Especially lately. Miss Connor, that's one of the things I had to see you about. She was speaking of

Victor Jason the other day. She's terribly bitter against him."

"I think she has some reason for that, David."

"She is bitter against you, too."

"I know."

"I tried to make her believe in you, but she can't."

"No, that's understandable, isn't it?"

"Not to me. Not now that I've seen you and spoken to you." His dark, hungry-dog eyes were on her face, filled with an expression of such worshipful trust that Judith's heart did a quick beat of emotional surprise. She had had minor experiences of masculine admiration, but the humble adoration of this boy was something new. New and rather wonderful and not in the slightest degree comic, in spite of the naïve awkwardness of him. A boy's love. His first. Something less and at the same time more than a man's could be. For this had no experience behind it. No memory. And was almost entirely a spiritual adventure. Judith was a little awed by it.

He leaned across the table towards her and lowered his voice.

"Aunt says that Jason's a terrible man, Miss Connor. She says that he will harm you. I had to see you; to warn you. Miss Connor, I'd kill him if he even thought of . . . of harming you. I'd *kill* him." The words came stammeringly and it was evident that the boy was deeply moved.

"I want you to know that I'd do anything for you," he went on in the same earnest way. "Anything in the world. If . . . if you ever . . . want help . . . will you come to me? I don't look much, I know, but I'm strong, and . . ."

"David," she broke in, her voice shaking, "it's lovely of you. But there's nothing to be afraid of in Victor Jason. I'm all right. But I'll always remember what you say, and I'll come to you if I ever need you. Truthfully, I will. I can't tell you how grateful I am."

"You don't have to be grateful," he said huskily.

Before they parted he asked if he might meet her again. She told him "yes," but wondered if it was right. She was rather at a loss to know how to deal with this boy adorer. However, she saw him again, several times, and by being quite natural with him, the problem was solved, for his worship of her did nothing but make him very happy. Judith began to like him very much; found him interesting, too; but with a disconcerting streak of the fanatic in him that made her rather afraid for him.

"But then," she argued to herself, "Ratty has that too; it must run in the family."

She felt rather like a mother to him at times and rather like an elder sister too. There was a big sense of responsibility towards him also, which made her encourage him in his work, and endeavour to give him strength, for she saw that his lonely life had made him introspective and none too well balanced in many ways. She realized that he had fixed upon her to be his guiding star, that his worshipping eyes were raised to her as to one who could do no wrong; think no evil and speak only truth. She was rather aghast sometimes at the opinion he had of her. Felt uncomfortable; guilty almost; knowing so many imperfections in herself that he was blind to.

It was a curious association, but it did her a world

of good. Gave her an interest; took her mind off her own difficulties; and made her feel needed and useful.

They never did anything more festive than have tea together, or, on rare occasions, lunch, but this satisfied them both.

Once, during April, as they were walking back to the office after lunch, Jason's big car went by them and Judith saw that Jason leaned forward to look at her and her companion. But he said nothing until on another day they all met, point blank, in the entrance of Jason's. No word was spoken, but Jason cast a keen look first upon Judith and then upon David.

David, realizing who this man was, sent back a flashing look from his intense young eyes that had a curious effect upon Jason. He stood stock still, as if the look had been a physical blow. Then went quickly past them and upstairs.

David turned to Judith, triumph illumining his face.

"I'm not afraid of him," he said exultingly. "I thought I might be. But I've seen him now, and I'm not."

That hint of fanaticism that always made Judith afraid was in his eyes.

"Hush, David," she said hurriedly, troubled. "I must go up. He'll be angry if I keep him waiting."

"Judith, you don't care for him, do you?" The boy pitched his voice low.

"I . . . No, you know I don't."

"Do you hate him, like aunt does?"

"My dear, I don't want to discuss him. Please let's not."

"Are you afraid of him?" David had an odd, penetrating way of hitting on truths at times.

"Only . . . sometimes." Judith hated to confess it.

David laughed and braced his shoulders.

"Well, don't be afraid. I'm not. And you remember what I said about him? I'll be going to my job next week, but I'll be back again before long."

"Yes, but that only makes me more afraid. I don't want anything done. I don't want anyone to interfere. The difficulty is mine. And I must carry it. I *must* go; good-bye."

He raised his hat.

"Thursday, for tea?" he suggested. "It'll probably be the last time before I go away."

"Yes, Thursday," she agreed, and hurried upstairs.

When she joined Jason in his room, she found him standing by the window, looking down into the street. He turned and said abruptly:

"Who's that young man you were with?"

Judith didn't want to tell him, but when he looked at her as he was looking now, she knew she must.

"David Rattray," she said.

The effect of the name was curious. There came that odd look again as if he had been struck. He didn't move and yet his whole being seemed to wince.

"Ratty's nephew?" The question came from him casually.

"Yes."

"Her brother's son, I've always understood?"

"Yes."

He drew a breath at that and some tension seemed to snap within him. He came towards his desk, thumped a closed fist upon it and said:

"You are not to see him again. Understand?"

The almost stricken look of him had given way to a blaze and his mouth was working oddly.

"I *must* see him again," she protested. "I have promised to. And he is going away soon."

"You are not to see him again," he repeated, and he drew a deep breath.

"He will think it brutal of me. He is lonely and I've tried to help him. He *depends* on me a lot. I can't let him down."

His clenched hand opened and moved down to the drawer in his desk. For a moment she was tempted, as always, to defy him. To dare him to use Pat's confession. But when it came to the point she, again as always, couldn't; didn't dare.

"Very well, I won't see him again," she said.

He laughed rather oddly and sat down in his chair, leaning on the desk, his head on his hands.

Something had shaken him. Judith, looking at him, found her heart beating suddenly faster. What was it? What was it? If only she knew!

He raised his head suddenly.

"You are not to write to him," he said.

"He will wait for me and wonder why I do not come."

"You are not to write to him. Not to telephone nor telegraph, nor send anyone with a message. In short, you are not to communicate with him again in any smallest sort of way." His words fell slowly and incisively.

Judith faced him, and their eyes met.

"This," she said, "is one of the beastliest things that even *you* have done."

"Just tightening up the loopholes," he retorted.

Judith was terribly unhappy about this. The thought that David would wait for her, and wait in vain; hoping to hear from her and hearing nothing, feeling his trust in her betrayed, made her miserable. But she could do nothing. She had seen too much of Jason's ruthlessness to cherish any hopes that he would not carry out his threats concerning Pat if she should defy his power. The dismissal of Miss Rattray had brought her starkly eye to eye with the reality of that power.

All Thursday she was in a fever of anxiety about David. If only she could think of some way of outwitting Jason; of getting through his command so that he couldn't possibly detect that she had got through it. But no inspiration came to her. And the hour of her appointment with David came and went and she had done nothing.

Next morning she found a letter from him at the office, and opened it eagerly. What she read both reassured her and filled her with fears.

"I waited till ten o'clock," he wrote. "But as you didn't come I went home. I was terribly disappointed as I have had word that I am to go to Grangemouth to-morrow, where the boat is lying, and that the cruise starts on Saturday instead of next week. But I know this: it is not your fault. It is *his*. Somehow he managed to prevent you meeting me. I saw in his face that he is against me. Why? What have I

done? But there is this comfort for me: that it was not your fault.

"When I get back—well, let him watch out for himself, that's all! I shan't forget that four hours' wait in a hurry."

There was more of the letter, but that was the passage that awakened a riot of mixed feelings within her. Thankfulness that he had had the understanding to know that the thing had not been her fault; fear of the threat in those last words. She couldn't regard it as simply the vapouring of a love-sick boy. There was much more in David than that. When he felt he felt deeply, and there was that look in his eyes that had already so often made her fear for him.

Still, he would be away for some time now; that was a good thing. Perhaps by the time he came back that four hours' wait would not be cutting such a wound in his mind.

She destroyed the letter as soon as she had read it, afraid that Jason might suspect that David had written and demand to see it.

When Jason came in, she was busy on the morning's work. But her heart went hot within her at his mere presence in the room. Above everything that he had ever done, she thought she would find it hardest to forgive this. Even his forbidding her to write to Barry didn't seem to her quite as cruel, for that hit only herself. Barry was not even expecting to hear from her, was not hoping, longing, for a word from her as David had waited and hoped and longed. David was so young. It was like hitting a child wilfully to hurt that boy. She was mechanically clacking

away at her typewriter as she thought these things, trying to subdue the rage that swelled her heart and seemed to make it too big for her breast.

If only she could get out of the trap she was caught in!

A day or two later a way seemed really to present itself.

Jason went to lunch and left his keys on his desk. Judith saw them when she crossed to put some letters ready for his return.

She stood looking down at them, an idea throbbing through her brain. Among those keys were the keys of his desk; among *those*—the key of that drawer wherein lay Pat's confession.

It she should unlock that drawer and take the confession? Take? No; *steal.* She might as well put it quite squarely to herself. Suppose she should steal that fatal paper? Jason might command and rage, he would have no power over her then. Every pulse in her was racketing. She stared down at the keys, as if hypnotized by them. Should she? Wasn't right and justice on her side? Must she have scruples when dealing with a man like Jason? To be free!

She drew a breath sharply; stretched out her hand and caught up the keys. Next moment she was down on her knees before the desk, fitting one key after another into the lock of that all-important drawer; finding at last the one that turned it; pulling the drawer open, seeking among the papers in it for her brother's writing.

She found it, and the beating of her heart seemed to fill the room.

To be free! She *was* free! With this in her hands

she *was* free. But her hands were shaking so that she could scarcely hold the precious paper. . . .

And then a big hand slid over her shoulder and whipped the paper from her fingers, and she turned with a cry to find herself face to face with Jason.

Jason, smiling his cruellest; Jason with that fiendish gleam of triumph in his eyes. . . .

"Appropriating other people's goods seems to run in the Connor family," he remarked. "I came back for my keys."

The keys were dangling from the lock of that open drawer, and he looked down at them.

"Give them to me," he said.

With one hand pressed close over her heart, Judith stooped and got the keys and held them out to him.

"The loopholes are not perhaps so numerous nor so easy to get through as you thought?" he suggested, pocketing the keys.

"Perhaps not. But I shall find one some day." Her voice came huskily.

"I have been waiting for the family weakness to assert itself."

"Perhaps you left your keys on your desk on purpose!" cried Judith.

"Perhaps I did," he answered noncommittally.

Strung beyond endurance, she turned and flung herself into the chair before her desk, bowing her head into her hands. His voice came to her, triumphing.

"I had a sort of idea that you were not a thief, although your brother is."

She swung round in her chair.

"I'm *not,* and you know it. But call me one if it pleases you. You can't hurt me that way!"

"I'm just wondering what I ought to do with you. I put you in a position of trust and you have betrayed it."

"Oh, carry on with the joke if it seems like a joke to you!"

"Well, let's see how much of a joke it is." He came to her. "I want your word of honour that you will never again attempt to get possession of this paper. Your word of honour, mind."

"I won't give it! I'll get that paper the very first moment I can!" she stormed back at him recklessly.

"Oh, then I'd better make use of it while I may."

She caught a breath, half crying now with sheer nervous weariness.

"I give you my word of honour. I give it. You know I have to," she said bitterly.

"Then that is all I will ask of you. I'm letting you off fairly lightly, don't you think?" His smile had never been so cruel.

She uttered a miserable laugh. He put the confession on the desk, shot her a look and went out again.

And there the thing lay, beneath her eyes, within reach of a stretched-out hand, the whole of the luncheon hour. The fiendish ingenuity of the man! How did he think of such tortures for her! To put freedom before her like this and to bar the way to it with her own word of honour.

For a while she moved round the room blindly, striking her closed right hand into the palm of her left, her face convulsed. Not daring to look at that paper on the desk; arguing her right to take it; knocking down her own arguments with the bludgeon of her promise. A promise given under compulsion! Was it

a promise? And anyway, what did it count against the freedom that that paper stood for! With that paper in her hand she could walk out of the Jason offices and never set foot in them again; never see Jason again; never suffer beneath the lash of his tongue, the cruelty of his smile, the triumph of his eyes!

Who was there in the whole world to blame her? No one. Knowing her provocation, no one *could*. She paused by the desk and reached out a shaking hand.

No one to blame her? Yes, one; just one. Herself.

Her hand dropped to her side, and she stood stone still. Even though she would gain so much, would not something greater still be lost? In that word of honour she had given—no matter under what stress it had been given—lay all the spiritual strength and resolution she was possessed of. It was something more than a matter of conscience. In that moment it seemed to her that she stood between gaining the whole world and losing her soul.

When Jason came back she was at her desk, busily typing, her manner calm and business-like. On his desk lay Pat's confession, just where he had left it; beside it a pile of letters she had done, all ready for his O.K. She did not turn when she heard him enter; she went on with her work. He looked from the confession back to her, and there was a gleam of admiration in the triumph of his dark eyes.

A strength was given to Judith by this that Jason could never have understood even had she tried to express it to him, and when she had gone through it over and over again in her memory, lived again the temptation of it and the conquering of the tempta-

tion, she came through it to find yet another comfort in it.

"I'm glad," she found herself thinking, "that when I see James Barry I shall have kept faith with the courage he saw in me. I shan't be able to tell him of course, but *I* shall know."

Chapter XI

SEEING James Barry was so near a thing now! The twenty-sixth of June! Only one little month ahead. Snow, rain or hail! Hurricane or flood! Nothing was going to prevent her keeping her appointment with him. So she told herself, when fear that Jason might forbid it swept her.

But Jason did not forbid it. Time slid along and he made no reference to it. She began to hope that he had forgotten it.

She was so radiant with hope that everyone noticed it. Maud Taylor saw it with secret rejoicing, not daring to comment on it lest she should, as she put it, "break the spell." Florence Paskey asked her one day if she had come into a fortune. The young man in the inquiry office told her she was looking a lot perked up these days, and flippantly asked for the recipe.

Her father pinched her ear playfully, and declared that his daughter was blossoming out so much that he'd hopes of her doing himself credit yet. And her mother hinted, in her gentle, indeterminate way, at some budding romance.

Judith laughed the romance merrily out of court.

"Oh no, darling!" she cried. "Nothing of that sort, I assure you!"

Mrs. Connor looked disappointed.

"I should like to see you settled, Judith. It seems

a pity that a girl should not marry while she's young. I believe in young marriages, dear. Fighting your way side by side; helping each other; give and take. It helps to make a marriage ideal!"

"Well, darling, I'm ready to agree to all that, only my difficulty is that there's no man in the case!"

"But surely, dear, you must meet a lot of men?"

"Oh yes! But none that I want to marry."

"It doesn't do to be too particular, love. I mean, the ideal man doesn't exist, you know."

"I've given up imagining that he does, mummie, for a long time now. Only one does want one's husband to have *some* of the ideal qualities!"

"It's no good demanding too much. No man can live up to it. And a man feels annoyed if he knows he isn't coming up to a girl's expectations of him. It irritates him and makes him feel bad-tempered."

"Why, mummie, what a well of worldly wisdom you are," cried Judith, really rather surprised by the acuteness of her mother's comments.

Mrs. Connor flushed up in her pink, pretty way.

"My dear, I haven't been married to your father all these years without learning something about men. One man stands for the whole breed, I think."

"I'm not going to agree with that," laughed Judith. "That's much too sweeping."

Mrs. Connor set her lips obstinately.

"You wait till you've been married a few years, Judy. You'll find out that I'm right."

"Well, that means then that all men are alike and one might as well marry the first man that comes along as any other! Rather indiscriminate, don't you think?"

"I didn't mean quite like that, love. What I mean is, that choose as carefully as ever you may, you'll find that in a few years' time you've only chosen an ordinary man after all. And that's when you have to start making the best of it."

"Do you know, mummie, you're the most awful little cynic I've ever met! And I never suspected it."

Mrs. Connor repudiated that charge with indignation.

"I'm very sure I'm no such thing!" she cried.

"You needn't mind," Judith answered her. "It's considered rather grand to be a cynic these days."

Her mother looked at her a moment, then said:

"You do say such odd things sometimes, Judy dear. I can't always follow your meaning. I'm sure I'm not slow. In fact I believe I'm quicker than some people. I don't mean to boast, but I've often been told so."

"Darling, I didn't mean to say anything odd," said Judith, distressed at once by the slight tone of injury that was in her mother's voice. To be perplexed always gave Mrs. Connor that little sense of personal injury. Judith tried so hard never to perplex her, for it set a distance between them that was so terribly hard to bridge. If Mrs. Connor felt injured, Judith felt outcast.

"It's queer that you should be the only one to say odd things like that," Mrs. Connor went on. "Your father never does. I never seem to be slow with him."

"You never seem slow with me," cried Judith unhappily. She came to Mrs. Connor quickly, leaned down, kissed her and put her arms around her. "You always seem just my own precious clever little mum-

mie, who's so much sweeter and better and wiser than I could ever be!"

Her mother emerged from the embrace to say, "Pat never says odd things, dear boy."

Judith straightened. Pat! Her father! Both were nearer to her mother than she was. Neither did one thing, or would do one thing, for her, but both were nearer to her. Both were comprehensible to her. While she was not. And never could be. Her mother loved her, she knew that, but it was a love with reservations. The unreasoning, unquestioning love she gave to her mother, her mother gave only to Pat. Well, she had always known that, and it is better to love than to be loved. Mrs. Connor depended upon her as she never depended upon Pat; turned to her in any crisis as she never turned to him.

"I should like to see you married and settled," Mrs. Connor's voice broke into a silence. "You know, dear, I never feel that I shall live long."

"Mother!" The cry in Judith's voice came from her heart.

"Oh, I don't mean that anything is going to happen to me right away, only my heart does go like a hammer sometimes."

"But Doctor Parsons said that so long as you didn't do too much or get excited, you'd live as long as anyone."

Judith's words semed to challenge the world.

"I know, darling, but all I say is, you never know; and I should love to see you well settled. It's different for Pat. He's a man, and a man can always fight for himself and make a way in the world."

Pat fighting for himself! Judith nearly laughed. Pat was such a manly, heroic figure in his mother's doting eyes.

"But, mummie, you've been feeling much better lately, haven't you?"

"Oh yes, except for these dizzy fits when my heart seems to go so quickly."

"Have you been doing housework?" asked Judith anxiously. "You mustn't, you know. It doesn't matter if the flat is in an utter pickle, you mustn't do a thing."

"No, I haven't, Judy. It isn't that."

"Well, are you worrying about anything?"

"Oh no, dear. Nothing out of the ordinary at all. In fact, with you and Pat both in such good billets, I've nothing to worry about. Only I think girls ought to settle down, and I'd like to see you do it. I'm sure you deserve the best, Judy."

"Right you are, darling; give me a chance to try and find him," answered Judith with a touch of gaiety she didn't feel. . . . Her mother's hint about her health worried her terribly.

"You're sure there's no one yet?" Evidently Mrs. Connor wasn't going to relinquish her romance theory so easily.

"I should tell you at once if there were, mummie."

"But you've seemed like it, Judy; looked like it. I'm not the only one that's noticed it. There now, you're blushing now, I do declare!"

Judith laughed and admitted that she was blushing.

"But anyone would blush at being so insistently provided with a romance," she protested.

"You look happy, Judy."

"I am happy—or would be if you were only stronger."

"Now I've gone and frightened you. I'm sure I didn't mean to do that."

"No, I'm not going to be frightened about you," declared Judith stoutly. "I'm going to be quite sure that you are better, and will go on getting better and better." She drew a breath, and her words petered out.

"Yes, dearie, don't be frightened. It's never any good. And you've been so much brighter just lately. If it isn't a romance, it's something."

Judith kissed her mother again.

"It's just that the twenty-sixth is so near, darling," she whispered. Or perhaps she only thought it, for Mrs. Connor didn't ask for any explanation.

So near! Yes. And then . . .

She was humming a tune one afternoon as she tidied up her desk preparatory to leaving for the day. The sound of her humming was a strange, unexpected sound in that room. Jason, hitching down his hat from its peg in a cupboard by the fireplace, turned and listened for a moment before saying:

"Very happy to-day, aren't you?"

She had forgotten that he was there, and turned with a start.

"Yes," she answered, leaving the word untrimmed.

"Is it your birthday by any chance?" he went on.

"No." To herself she added: "He knows perfectly well; he hasn't forgotten. He's just baiting me as usual." And a cloud no "bigger than a man's hand" gathered on the clear horizon of her hope and happiness.

He was pulling his cheque-book out of his pocket now, and bent over his desk, making out a cheque. Tearing it from the stub, he came to her, holding it out for her to take.

Thinking it was some business matter he had forgotten during the day, she took it, questioningly waiting for instructions, and then saw that it was made payable to herself.

"Pay Miss Judith Connor the sum of Two Hundred Pounds."

She read the words with bewildered eyes.

"To get yourself an outfit suitable to the importance of the occasion," he explained, and the smile she hated was on his lips, the look of darkness in his eyes.

Fear went all through her.

"The occasion?" she asked as steadily as she could.

"Our marriage!" he told her.

Her eyes went blank with utter incredulity.

"Our . . . ?" she began.

He explained further.

"You are marrying me at noon—*on the twenty-sixth.*"

Now indeed Judith felt that she must be dreaming. She and Jason to marry! It was too fantastic to be believed. She looked at him blankly, stupidly almost, from sheer inability to believe what she had heard.

The first words came stammeringly.

"But you don't . . . care for me?"

"Care for you? Do you mean that I am not in love?" he answered. "No, I'm not. But you are an unusual girl, Judith. Worth cultivating; interesting to watch. I quite like to have you around."

"That isn't enough to . . . marry on," she said, almost too stunned even to feel indignant.

"Quite enough," he contradicted. "For me."

"And what about me?" she cried. "Am I not to be consulted?"

"How often do I consult you, Judith? Have I ever made a habit of it?" A touch of provocative irony in that.

"Don't call me Judith!" she flashed out, her nerves suddenly tingling.

"Mayn't I call my future wife by her first name?"

"Future wife!" she echoed, and now full realization swept upon her, and she was quiveringly protesting.

"I am not your future wife! You are talking sheer nonsense. Nothing in the world would induce me to marry you!"

He looked at her with a maddening little glint of amusement in his eyes.

"But then nothing in the world would induce you to do any of the things that I have said you are to do. And yet you have always done them."

"This is a thing so utterly monstrous that none of the old considerations count. My mother . . . even *Pat* . . . wouldn't let me do a thing like this! This has gone too far. Mother will understand and sympathize. Even Pat will, too."

"In prison?" He slipped the words in sharply.

"You will not let him go to prison. You can't mean that! It's beyond belief!" Judith raised a hand to her forehead; turned away drawing a breath; then back again quickly.

"Anyway, I refuse to marry you. I don't care what

happens, I refuse to marry you. You've brought me to breaking point and nothing matters any more. I refuse, absolutely, to marry you." There was a spot of bright colour in each cheek and her eyes were dark and flashing; almost wild.

"Now I suppose," she added, "you will use that confession?"

"Oh yes! That's what the confession is for," he answered her in that curiously ready, disarming manner of his; as if he honestly saw nothing monstrous in the use he was making of his power.

If he expected her rebellion to be shaken he was disappointed, for she only said:

"Then you must use it, that's all. I am past caring! You can do what you like. I'm free of you!"

She had, as she declared, reached snapping point, and the spirit of rebellion blazed in her eyes, and for several hot moments tumbled like molten lava from her lips. She was rather fine in her revolt against him, and a look came into his eyes as he stood witnessing it that had never been called into them before. When her words petered out, she swung away from him, proud and defiant, gathered her outdoor things, and made for the door. His eyes followed her.

"I give you three days," his voice came after her.

She turned back like the lash of a whip.

"Give me all eternity, and my answer is the same!" she retorted.

She left him, feeling as she hadn't felt for months —*free*. All the world; the whole of life was in that one word! Free! She was free at last. She had defied him. Let him do as he would! Her mother would see

that she was right. And Pat? Well, she had done all that could humanly be demanded of her for Pat already. This was a thing—a desecration of body and soul—that even Pat could not ask of her. And if he should she would refuse. Must refuse. There were limits to the righteousness of sacrifice. . . . Three days he had given her, and she laughed them to scorn.

Two days went by, and he showed no sign by his manner that anything unusual had happened between them. She did her work exactly as always; he gave his orders quite as usual.

On the evening of that second day when she returned home, fate met her on her very threshold, and with a terrified throb of the heart she found herself face to face with the doctor, just leaving the flat.

"Mother?" she questioned, the word coming breathlessly.

Yes; it was upon her mother's account that he had called. Nothing to be pressingly alarmed about, but all the same . . .

"Her heart?" Again a breathless question.

Yes, it was her heart; another of those fainting attacks; a slight one; but important of course.

The doctor put it kindly, tactfully, but finished positively. Any shock, any great grief, any great joy even, *might* be too much for the delicate little woman. He had done everything that was necessary; would call to-morrow morning. . . .

Judith went blindly into the flat. . . .

After a sleepless night she faced Jason in his office, her face pale ivory in the cloud of her dusky hair.

"I'm beaten again. I'll marry you, if you still demand it."

"The time limit is nearly up," was all he said, but there was satisfaction in his smile.

Later in the day he gave her a ring; rather big, rather heavy; a shade too big. She let him slide it on to her finger, all cold indifference without, all despair within.

He smiled up into her face.

"You are happy with me. Do you understand?"

She laughed, a short, despairing little sound, and said bitterly:

"Oh, I knew that *that* condition would be imposed sooner or later."

"You are beginning to understand me, perhaps?"

"No. You are too ingeniously fiendish for me to understand, but I am beginning to know what to expect."

She looked down at the ring, a beautiful thing of sapphires set in an unusual design, and just for a moment her shoulders drooped and hopelessness engulfed her; but the next moment she was looking up at him staunchly.

"I suppose you know that I loathe and despise you with every atom of me," she said coldly.

"That ought to make our marriage very exciting," was all he answered.

It was a day or two before she could break the news to her mother, recovered now, but more frail and delicate than ever. She led up to it by gentle degrees, not daring, in view of the doctor's warning, to give it abruptly.

Mrs. Connor was inclined to be overwhelmed, but it made her very happy, and she prattled, in blissful

ignorance, of the great romantic happiness that had come to darling Judith.

Handsome Pat Connor, too, was all up in the air with delight, and was distressingly sentimental.

When Jason insisted upon coming home with Judith to be introduced to her people, Connor grasped his hands and brought out his most fetching brogue in honour of the great occasion.

"It's the happy man I am to meet you an' all. But how am I going to spare my little girl? Mr. Jason, you're tearing the heart's heart out of me, so ye are! But a father must set aside his own pain when it means his child's happiness. . . ."

And more, of a like sort, while in his luxury-loving, selfish "heart's heart" he was doing rapid calculations of the several thousands per annum which Jason must undoubtedly be worth. Anything from ten to fifteen thousand. And cars and houses galore! And surely to goodness, a place at table for the poor, hard-working old man who's the author of his beloved's being! A pæan of thanksgiving and hope was throbbing in his heart and coming to unspoken words in his brain.

Judith was in an agony of spirit, which her father *may* have seen, for he had his perception, but which her mother certainly didn't, for she was not prone to see this kind of thing. When Jason bent above her hand in a singularly charming manner, the little woman looked up all in a romantic flutter and said:

"Mr. Jason, Judy pretended to me that there was nothing of the sort, but I *knew* it! And I'm happy that it's you, for my dear girl deserves the *best*. Oh

dear, oh dear! What a wonderful thing it is to be sure!" And Mrs. Connor shook hands with her big, black-browed, prospective son-in-law, and tried not to feel awed by him. The great Victor Jason going to marry Judy! Whoever could have guessed it! Dear girl! But it was no more than she deserved!

Jason turned to Judith, the triumph very bright in his eyes. A smile, white and brilliant, on his lips.

"The sly puss! But *we* knew she was hiding a secret happiness. *We* knew!" Connor was exuberant. "You can't deceive your parents, Judy. D'you think we've watched over you, prayed for you, worked for you all these years without being able to read the heart of you, girl?"

The fine sentimental voice was in full flight now and Connor enjoying himself immensely.

"Mr. Jason," he went on, and then broke into a side channel to say: "Or I suppose, since you're to be a son to me, I must call you Victor, my dear fellow?"

"Victor, by all means," answered Jason readily.

"Victor, then, you must stay and dine with us. On such an occasion I can take no refusal. You will find us humble and plain sort of folk, but, by all the Saints, we're honest and happy and united!" Mr. Connor spoke with a tremble of feeling. Very effective—if only Judith hadn't heard it so often before.

"Oh, Pat!" put in Mrs. Connor, quite overwhelmed by this grand idea. "I don't think we have anything to offer Mr. Jason. . . ."

"Victor, mother, Victor," put in her husband playfully, signalling with his eyebrows for her to be quiet. "And as for having nothing to offer! Why! a crust of bread eaten in company with an honest man is a

better meal than a Lucullian feast eaten with a rogue! Victor, my son, uphold me!" He appealed with a theatrical gesture and a laughing flash of his fine eyes—"the handsomest eyes that ever broke hearts in Ballycoonan bedad!"—to Jason.

Jason answered with a smile. Judith's father amused him; he was so simple, so transparent. Jason was already guessing at the amount his future father-in-law would have touched him for before the evening was out. To Judith's despair, he accepted the invitation of the "crust," settled down in the modest little living-room to make himself charming to Mr. and Mrs. Connor.

Judith, moving in and out in her preparations for supper, was surprised out of her desperate despair to realize how truly charming Victor Jason *could* make himself when he really wanted to.

Surprised and savage too, for he was unmistakably winning little Mrs. Connor's heart; making both her parents his firm allies. Judith knew that if she appealed to them, she would find her appeal dismissed with surprise and indignation. What could she have against this splendid, charming, generous man? For Jason was already hinting to handsome Pat Connor that he had only to ask.

Oh yes, she thought bitterly, she could see the net he was weaving around her being woven here, in her home, beneath her eyes.

Going in and out of the room fetching things from the kitchen for the table, she heard the little scraps of talk intermittently. . . .

"Of course, we are simple people. . . ." Her mother's gentle little voice. "We have only this one

living-room. . . . As a rule, you know, we eat in the kitchen. . . ."

Judith left the room on her father's bluff and hearty colouring of this rather bald statement of her mother's, and came back later to something more personal still.

"It's like a wonderful fairy story. . . ." Her mother's voice again; soft and dreamy and tremulous with feeling. "Our dear girl to marry such a great man. So rich and . . ."

"Faith, mother, is it his riches that you are after valuing Victor for?" Connor's expostulation came with rich humour, and Judith saw him exchange a laughing look with Jason. As one who should say: "We know she doesn't mean that, but these women, my dear fellow, they never can express themselves, can they?"

"Of course not!" Mrs. Connor went quite pink with indignation at the idea. "How can you say such a thing, Pat? All I meant was that I've always wanted her to have the best of everything." She turned to Jason with tears of earnestness in her eyes.

Judith, setting the knives and forks straight upon the table with mechanical hands, saw Jason lean forward and pat Mrs. Connor's hand in a way that made the little woman his slave for life.

"Of course you are glad that I'm rich," he said heartily. "No mother wants her daughter to marry a poor man in these days."

"I knew you would understand. It's her happiness I'm wanting. And then I'm sure Pat—my dear son, you know—will be delighted. You know, Mr. Jason —Victor, I mean, only it does seem *so* odd!—they

work my poor boy too hard where he is at present. Such a boy for work! Well, *you* know, of course. . . ."

Judith couldn't bear it. She went out of the room quickly.

How the evening passed she simply didn't know. It was one long nightmare till Jason left somewhere around eleven o'clock. And he deliberately made it as bad for her as he possibly could by making himself so agreeable to her parents; shooting little triumphant looks at her which clearly said: "See, they are entirely on my side" and by forcing her into declarations of happiness in the engagement.

She had vainly imagined that she had sounded the depths of the misery that her association with Jason could cause long ago. But to-night she went to bed heavy with despair. Unable to sleep. Staring up into the dark, wide-eyed and still. Finding in her heart no prayer, no hope.

Next morning she wrote to Pat telling him what had happened: imploring him to do something, anything, to save her from this final ghastliness. But the letter she received in answer was hopeless. Pat was surprised at the tone she took; thought she ought to go down on her bended knees and bless him for being the means—indirectly, anyway—of bringing about such a marriage for her. She was a most ungrateful girl to be unhappy about it. Think what a lot she would be able to do for the family, and after all, didn't she owe the family *something?* She ought to consider herself one of the luckiest girls in all England for having hooked a man like Jason.

Thus Pat, with masterly forgetfulness that he had

once described the man Judith was so lucky to have "hooked," as "the cruellest beast alive."

Judith had not had any real hope of Pat. She knew him rather distressingly well by this time. She had no hope of anything now.

The engagement was formally announced to the staff of Jason's, and many and varied were the comments in the outer office. Florence Paskey was of the opinion that V.J. must have gone stark, staring crazy to lower himself to a girl as dull as Judith when there were girls—and not far off either—who could really appreciate a man like him and give him a little life. Angela Brown declared that Judith was a whole lot cleverer than she'd taken her to be. Fancy getting him to marry her! Actually to *marry* her! She'd played her cards well and cunningly. Maud Taylor was utterly taken aback. This was the final great incomprehensibleness of the whole affair. She asked Judith quite bluntly whether she were happy. Judith stonily answered that she was. Maud didn't believe her, of course, but she couldn't shake her about it. Judith declared she was happy, and Maud again had to let it go at that.

The twenty-sixth dawned with angry red streaks in a leaden sky, and the "shepherd's warning" was justified later by torrents of rain and gusty winds. Her wedding day! Judith looked from the window, tears falling like the rain, her heart seared with hot anger as the sky had been streaked with red; her soul shaken with fierce gusts of rebellion that matched the savage wind outside.

Mercifully, the wedding was to be absolutely a quiet affair. Jason had ordained that, and Judith had

not let him know how relieved she was about it lest he should change his mind and make an elaborate function of it, just to sting her.

There was to be no reception; merely a luncheon at a restaurant with Mr. and Mrs. Connor present. Somehow the morning passed. Somehow she was dressed in the white crêpe costume that Jason had told her to get. Somehow she was walking up the aisle of the empty church on the arm of her father. Handsome Pat Connor, resplendent in full ceremonial war paint, procured at the expense of Judith only too well guessed whom! Somehow she found herself meeting Jason at the altar and standing before it at his side hearing the words that bound her to him as his wife. Somehow it was all lived through and she was in his big car with him driving through slashing rain—Mrs. Victor Jason.

Mrs. Victor Jason! She spoke the name to herself and closed her eyes.

"Well, my dear, that was all quite simple, wasn't it?" Jason's voice, ringingly triumphant.

She nodded, feeling, without seeing, those dark, victorious eyes of his upon her. Quite simple! Yes! And the rest of life? She shivered and looked out through the rain-streaked glass into the shining street.

Luncheon at the Madrid was sheer penance. Mr. Connor was in his element with speeches and toasting and sentiment and tears. Mrs. Connor's sentiment and tears were real, and Judith's heart was wrung within her. When good-bye had to be said, she clung to her little mother as if she were clinging to her last hope in life.

"I must see you often . . . often. . . . All the time. . . ." she whispered passionately.

"Yes, yes, dearie, so long as Victor doesn't mind," Mrs. Connor whispered back.

A grip of hands, a last desperate kiss, and Judith was again in the big car beside Jason.

It had been arranged that they should go by road straight to his house at Porthverris in Cornwall, breaking the journey by staying the night at a cottage outside Salisbury which he kept as a halfway break between London and Porthverris.

Judith, leaning back in her luxurious corner, realized when they got into the country that the rain had stopped and that there was a sweet, refreshing smell of damp earth arising in the air. Beyond that she was too wretched to notice anything. She vaguely imagined that they were heading for Salisbury, but the whole thing was too much like a bad dream to make her desire to ask questions. And so it was something of a shock to see suddenly the wide stretch of Chemming Common rolling away from the roadway with the pine-crested hill rising beyond. She sat straight suddenly, her miserable lethargy dropping from her all at once, and glanced swiftly out of the other window. Yes, there on that side was the little station she had left on that day exactly one year ago! This road that they were travelling was the very road she had crossed, and that track across the Common the track she had followed sheer up to the pine woods on the top of the further hill.

Her heart was beating hard; her temples throbbing. As she had said, she did not know Victor Jason;

could not follow the subtle cruelties of his mind, but she was beginning to know what to expect.

She turned to him swiftly.

"Where are we going?" she demanded imperatively.

He smiled into her face.

"To keep your appointment with James Barry of course," he said. "Did you think I was going to be so inconsiderate as to allow you to fail him?"

For a whole year Judith had been looking forward to this afternoon with Barry; had been counting the days and hours that brought it nearer; had been praying that nothing should prevent their meeting. Now for the first time she prayed most fervently that he had forgotten all about it.

But he hadn't. Barry was not the forgetting kind. When they got out of the car at the rose-covered cottage—the roses battered and dripping from the recent rain to-day—and went through to the garden, James Barry, walking up and down the path to fill in time, turned at the sound of their steps, and across the intervening space of table-dotted grass his eyes met hers and held fast.

Held so magnetically that for a time he seemed to be utterly unaware that she was not alone, although she was acutely conscious that Jason was looking on at this meeting, watchfully, gloatingly.

Big, bronzed as ever, strong and wholesome, Barry looked. How glad she was to see him again! How glad and how terribly sorry!

It seemed ages that they stood so, but actually it was only seconds. Then Barry's eyes turned quickly to Jason; back again to her, sweeping her from head

to foot, reading the symbol of the white clothes she wore; his face going set and tense as he read. He came towards them, a rather queer smile on his lips. Judith couldn't move; daren't; she felt that if she attempted to take one step, her knees would collapse and she would faint. But Jason went towards Barry smiling radiantly and holding out a welcoming hand.

"Well, Barry, here's my wife come to keep faith with you, you see!"

They shook hands.

"Your wife?" said Barry steadily.

"Married this morning," replied Jason.

Barry moved past him to Judith; stood close before her, looking down into her eyes, his own suddenly blazing with feeling so hot and strong that she took it to be anger. But as he looked the blaze cooled, for there was stark tragedy in the eyes that were raised to his. Tragedy in the white face of her; in the wilting droop of her slender shoulders. This was only a glimpse, for suddenly she seemed to realize how much she was revealing, and in quick fear squared her shoulders, lifted her head, and smiled courageously. The impression of tragedy was so lifted that Barry had a confused feeling that it never had been there. . . .

She offered her hand. He took it. Held it, looked down, imploring dumbly that she should clear his confusion and let him know the truth. What was in that announcement of Jason's? *Was* it tragedy? Or was it this that she was showing now; this smiling aspect of happiness? Which was the truth? But she couldn't let him know the truth. Dared not. She laughed and rallied him upon his astonishment, de-

claring that he looked as if he didn't believe Jason's news, and at last he took his cue from her; offered his congratulations, dropped her hand, turned aside his eyes and assumed a manner of easy friendliness.

And that was Judith's second meeting with James Barry. That was the moment she had so looked forward to and so longed for. And now it was over and she was back again in the big car beside her husband, the imperturbable back of the perfect chauffeur before her eyes. . . . She was sitting straight and still; her hands were clenched tight in her lap; and she was drawing deep breaths and sighing them out again in an effort to keep herself from breaking down altogether.

"Power." Jason's voice, speaking with a sort of purring softness, came through to her. "It's a great little thing—power." He lingered on the word as if he loved it.

She turned quickly, her pale face flushing, her eyes dark and passionate.

"If to arouse such hatred in me as to make me feel that I could . . . *kill* . . . you . . . is a great thing, then power is great. . . . Power is very great!" A sob broke from her, and she bit her lip to keep it back. His eyes were turned sideways upon her.

"We must see a lot of Barry," was all he said. "Great chap, Barry."

The cottage near Salisbury turned out to be a charming place modernized out of an old farmhouse. It was beautifully equipped and fully prepared in every detail. Jason handed Judith over to the care of a competent maid and they did not meet again till dinner.

She had herself in control again now, and sat opposite him at the candle-lit table meeting his eyes unflinchingly. She was still in the dead white crêpe dress, but he had changed into an easy lounge suit and looked comfortable and at home.

With the departure of Crochett, a silent-footed man who appeared to combine the posts of valet and butler and general factotum, Jason lifted his glass.

"Mrs. Jason—your health," he said, laughing.

She raised her glass in silence, touched it to her lips and put it down again.

He looked across at her, still laughing.

"Always wear white, Judith. It's most telling with your dark hair and red lips. By the way, is the redness of your lips natural?" He asked the question with a perfectly simple curiosity.

"Quite," she answered.

"I've often wondered."

She looked at him then in surprise.

"Have you?"

"Well, why not? They are exceptionally red, aren't they?"

"I suppose they must be, but I shouldn't have thought you would have wondered about it."

"I always wonder about things that seem at all extraordinary. I'm wondering now whether you would really kill me if I gave you the chance?"

She coloured hotly.

"One says wild things when one is . . . desperately miserable," she said, in a low voice.

"Then you didn't mean it?"

She raised her face quickly and leaned slightly towards him.

"You arouse whatever there is in me that is bad and hateful and violent. I didn't know that I could feel so strongly and as . . . as horridly . . . as I do."

"Then you *did* mean it?"

She leaned back again, and closed her eyes a moment as if praying for calmness.

"I suppose words don't come out of absolutely nothing," she said after a moment. "I suppose some sort of impulse of hate and . . . desperation made me feel . . ." She broke off.

"You're an honest girl," he said. "And a plucky one." He spoke so simply and sincerely that she was surprised again.

"Well, I wouldn't have married you if you hadn't been. If there's one thing I loathe to have around, it's a liar," he added.

She made no answer.

Presently he spoke again.

"How do you like your maid, Millie?"

"She seems a very nice girl."

"I propose to take her with us to Cornwall."

"By all means."

"Crochett does everything for me."

"Yes."

"But if you don't find Millie satisfactory, please get rid of her."

"Thank you."

"I want you to run the house and the staff," he went on.

"I'm not at all used to it."

"But you are clever and adaptable."

"I'll try, anyway."

"I like things to be done very simply. I've got my cars and my horses and my boat, and I don't go in a great deal for any society trimmings."

"I quite understand."

The rest of dinner passed in silence. When they rose at the finish of the meal, he stood for a moment looking at her. She stopped on her way to the door to return the look quickly. There was something in his eyes which, by reminding her that she was his wife, made her heart beat more quickly. He came slowly towards her, and she backed towards the door, panic in her wide eyes. He stretched out one big hand, caught her arm and pulled her to him.

"Do you realize that I've never once kissed you yet?" he said.

"I've been praying . . . praying that you never would!" Her answer came almost soundlessly.

He laughed slightly.

"Oh, no, my dear; I'm not made of such cold, heroic stuff," he said. He bent and kissed her cheek quite quietly, and then, rather quickly, those red lips of hers.

She stood unmoving; and it seemed to her that something within her died at the touch of his lips upon hers.

Chapter XII

LESS than a week later Jason had to return to town on business that couldn't get along without him, and rather to Judith's surprise he insisted that she should go with him.

"I've got quite used to having you around, Judy," he told her, giving her the queer little look he always gave her when he used that pet-name. He knew she hated to hear it from him.

"If you say I must go with you, I must," she answered indifferently. She had got to a state when it didn't seem to matter much what happened. She felt that something had died with Jason's first kiss, and the dying of it left her cold and numbed towards life. After all, she thought wearily, even though going with him meant living with him, at least she would be able to see a lot of her mother.

"That doesn't sound very well, Judy," he said slowly. "Anyone hearing that tone might think you were not happy with me."

She made no comment.

"And you *are* happy with me. Do you understand?"

"Quite," she told him.

"Well, don't forget it, please."

"For my own sake I shall not," she answered coldly.

He said no more then.

It was a tremendous joy to be again with her

mother, and Judith was nearer to being happy than she had been since her marriage; near enough, anyway, to make it easy to deceive Mrs. Connor into thinking her happy. She delighted in giving her mother presents, both utilitarian and ornamental, and when the little woman protested that "dear Victor" would scold her for extravagance, she was glad to be able to say, in all sincerity:

"Victor is absolutely generous about money, mother. He simply doesn't care how much I spend."

This was true, and although Judith hated his lavishness towards herself—to be fed and clothed and housed and decked with jewels by him made her so terribly *his*—yet she enjoyed her ability to be lavish towards her mother. She didn't understand this generosity in Jason, and sometimes watched for the "catch in it," unable to credit him with virtues pure and simple, and feeling that somehow, at some time, he would use the fact of his generosity to taunt her. But in the meantime she meant to get all she could for her mother out of the tragedy that her marriage was. Her father had sponged more and more openly and unashamedly ever since the announcement of the engagement until it was absolutely blatant, but Jason didn't seem to mind this in the smallest degree, and handsome Pat Connor had been on velvet. He had blossomed out in a dazzling succession of new suits, smoked cigars which Judith was morally certain he had cadged, or even filched, from Jason, and drank a brand of whisky unheard of in the Connor family before.

Two days after they reached town Judith was having tea alone, when Crochett announced James

Barry. That *did* break through her cold control and she felt a wild impulse to say that she wouldn't see him, but he was already coming into the room at Crochett's heels and the impulse died and gave way to a singing gladness at seeing him again.

"All blue and brown." That was how she had described him when first she saw him, and that described him still. His presence was like a sea breeze in a stuffy room. She held out a quick hand and he caught it strongly in his long, lean fingers. Such character in a handshake, she reflected. Barry's was just like himself, strong, firm, friendly, a hand-shake that really meant something.

"Sit down and be given tea," she said, laughing with a touch of excitement.

He sat down opposite her, and across the little table they looked at each other. It was wonderful to be with him again. Almost too wonderful.

She was so happy, and it was so strange to her these days to be happy, that it went to her head like wine; she gave him tea, talking quickly, laughing a lot and with a bright stain of colour in each cheek that gave her an unusually brilliant appearance. If, no more than five minutes later, you had asked her what she had been chatting about, she couldn't for the life of her have told you. It was as if some spring were suddenly let loose. But presently she became conscious that he was as unaware of what she was saying as she was herself. That he was really not listening to her at all. That he was sitting on the other side of the little tea-table just simply watching her. Watching her with steady, intent eyes. As soon as she realized this, the excited flow of words

was stemmed at her lips; her colour faded and she dropped abruptly to nervous silence.

"Did you know Victor Jason when we met last year?" His question dropped into the silence suddenly, like a pebble into a still pond.

Panic assailed her again. If he was going to speak of Jason, how was she to keep the truth from him? With others it had become easy to make pretences, but with Barry? Never! It simply couldn't be possible.

"No," she answered, and left the word quite untrimmed.

"I thought you didn't."

"Why?"

"Because I believe that you would have spoken of him if you had."

"My brother worked for him at that time."

"Oh? And it was through your brother that you met him?" Barry's eyes were still fixed upon her.

She hesitated a moment; then:

"Yes. He left, and I took his place in Victor's office."

"But you were so happy in the job you had. I remember you telling me about your boss and saying——"

She broke in with a hurried laugh.

"How you do remember things!"

"I don't believe there is a word we spoke that day that I don't remember," he replied slowly.

She quite unnecessarily touched the equipment of the tea-tray, fidgeting things about with quick hands.

"It was a lovely day," she said at last. "So hot,

and my goodness, how thirsty and tired and dusty I was!" Her light tone was not very convincing.

Suddenly he set his tea-cup down and rose. He moved away from her, then turned, and from halfway across the big drawing-room asked abruptly:

"Mrs. Jason, did you get married on the twenty-sixth on purpose?"

Her eyes, full of distress, were raised to his for a fleeting moment, then lowered again.

"Victor—chose the date," she said at last.

"And was it his idea to keep the appointment with me?"

Panic seized her again. She felt that he was rushing her into revelations that she dared not give. But she couldn't tell him anything but the truth.

"Yes."

"Odd idea, rather, wasn't it?"

"Very. But Victor is a most unusual man." The words came breathlessly.

Barry shot her a keen look. Then, to her relief, he smiled.

"I've known him for a good many years," he said, "but I certainly didn't think he was as unusual as that!" He spoke lightly, and she laughed noncommittally. "You know, when he told me that you were married to him, I was quite knocked sideways with surprise."

"Yes, I saw you were."

"I'm afraid my manners were lamentably lacking."

"Oh, no! Naturally you were surprised; the whole situation was rather—absurd—wasn't it? Now tell me about your adventures . . . potting grizzlies?" Her smile was tremulous.

"Remember that, do you?" he said quickly.

"Of course."

He sat down again and, to her intense relief, did as she asked and told her of various things that had befallen him. This was safe, and she determined to keep him to it, and imagined that she was succeeding until he said abruptly:

"I've been thinking things over since June the twenty-sixth."

"Things?" Her voice was full of nervousness and trouble again.

"You. Jason. Your marriage," he said, clipping the words off short.

"Oh, please *don't!*" The words left her lips before she could catch them back.

"Don't what?" he demanded bluntly.

"Don't think things over," she said breathlessly. "Just accept things. Me. Victor. And my marriage . . . just take it as having . . . happened. . . ." She knew she was saying too much; it seemed difficult to say anything at all and not too much; and yet she couldn't stop.

He made no direct answer, but switched the conversation to other things again, and presently rose to go. It was almost a relief to her to hear him saying good-bye, and yet it was such pain, too.

"I'll come again if I may," he said. "When is Jason likely to be at home?"

"Sometimes he's quite early; sometimes quite late," she answered. "I believe he is going back to Cornwall soon. He's crazy on sailing and is planning a short cruise for later on. His yacht's a beauty."

"Aren't you going, too?"

"Why, yes! I believe so."

"You said 'he.' "

She laughed shakily.

"I haven't got used to saying *we* yet, I suppose," she said.

He shook hands then and left, and she sat with her hands strained together, fighting down the tears that seemed as if they must come. She won the fight, and was glad that she had when she saw Jason's car come up to the house much earlier than usual. She crossed into the hall and fled upstairs to the seclusion of her own room, wanting time to steady up. She had not cried, but Jason didn't need signs as violent as tears to enable him to read emotion in her face. He had a knack of knowing things without having to have them thrust into his notice.

"You. Jason. Your marriage . . ." Barry's words echoed in her memory. Evidently he had been thinking. And had guessed, too, that things were not perfectly well for her. She supposed she must have shown it in her face when she met him in the rose garden on that ghastly wedding day.

She flung herself into the chair before her dressing-table and looked at her mirrored face in the three-fold glass before her. What was she revealing now? Her wretched face! It was so deadly truthful! It was always giving her away! What had Barry guessed? How much did he suspect? How *was* she to keep the truth from him? She couldn't. Never had been able to. Even in their first meeting the truth about everything had just come tumbling from her usually reserved tongue in the most astonishing way. He had only to question her in that direct, honest way of

his; only to look at her with his level blue eyes to make pretence impossible. And she *must* not let him know how unhappy she was. If she did Jason would know and would take his revenge. And then all that she had suffered would have been in vain. Her mother would know the truth of her beloved Pat and . . . Judith closed her eyes a moment. No; Barry simply must not know. She must *lie,* lie squarely and deliberately, if necessary. She examined her face minutely. There was still a tinge of colour in her cheeks. Still the brilliance of excitement in her eyes. Jason mustn't see these things. She must be her white, cold self again before she went down. A sound made her start round in her chair, and she saw that Jason was standing in the open doorway.

"You disappeared pretty quickly when I came in," were his first words, spoken in a challenging tone that always put her on her mettle.

"I never *want* to see you, you know," she replied. "I always get away from you when I can. You must know that."

"If you could get away from me for good, you would, eh?"

"Certainly I would."

"But you can't, can you?" He smiled.

"No."

"Because I have the power."

"Yes."

He turned and closed the door behind him, then turned back.

"Come here and kiss me."

Her face flamed. But she rose and came to him obediently and stood before him.

"Hate me, don't you?" he said, as if he gloried in the fact.

"You know I do."

"But you've got to kiss me, haven't you?"

"You know I have."

"Do it then."

She raised a face like marble and touched his cheek with her lips.

"That's not a kiss, my dear." He caught her roughly in his arms, tilted back her head, kissed her lips, and released her.

"That power still works, doesn't it?" His taunting voice came to her naggingly.

"Yes."

"And always will?"

"As far as I can see it always will," she cried, in a low voice.

"Barry's been here, Crochett tells me."

"Yes."

"Stout fellow, Barry; we must see a lot of him. You like him, don't you?"

"Very much."

His answer to that was a laugh.

"How long did he stay?" he asked after a moment.

"Perhaps half an hour."

"Not longer?"

"I didn't time it," she said coldly.

"But when you *like* a man very much, an hour is apt to seem like only half," he suggested.

"Oh, no! I think I am quite clear about it." Her tone was disdainful, for she read the imputation in his words and was determined to take no sort of

notice of it. She moved away from him and was instantly called back.

"I didn't tell you to go," said Jason.

"No. I forgot that I mustn't move without permission," she said scornfully.

"That silly little power of mine, eh?"

"It *is* silly and it *is* little," she said.

"But it has big effects?"

"They seem big to me. But I suppose I'm silly and little and unimportant too."

"Oh, my power is unimportant now, is it?"

"Against the really important things, of course it is! But it's difficult to remember that one isn't a really important thing. That one is just a tiny fleck of a thing that doesn't ultimately matter one way or the other."

"Quite philosophical, aren't you?"

"I have to be, or go mad."

There was a moment's silence, then:

"You are just as much in the power of your power as I am, you know. You are fascinated and enthralled by it just as some men are enthralled by a drug, or by drink. . . . You are terribly to be pitied, Victor."

"You pity me?"

"Yes. When I'm not hating you too violently."

He shot her a look.

"Pity is akin to love, not hate," he said with a laugh, and still laughing he turned and left her.

Jason was as good as his word about seeing a lot of Barry, for next evening he brought him back to dinner and, across the table, asked him to go back to Cornwall with them and to be their guest on the cruise he had planned.

Judith waited almost breathlessly for Barry's reply.

Barry cautiously but firmly refused the invitation. She was relieved and at the same time almost unbearably disappointed. Jason tried to persuade him to change his mind, but in vain. Barry was firm.

"I have a great deal to see to at my farm," was his excuse. "You remember the farm, Mrs. Jason?"

"Of course. Did you really fix it up?" replied Judith.

"Yes. And it's going to be ready for occupation this autumn."

"You are going to stay in England this time, then?" put in Jason.

" 'Bout time I did I think."

"You ought to marry and settle down, old man. Nothing like it, I assure you," said Jason distinctly.

Quite suddenly a look, swift, appraising, watchful, passed between the two men, and Judith, seeing it, found her heart beating hard without knowing why.

When Barry had left, Jason turned to Judith.

"I want him to come down to Cornwall," he said abruptly.

"But he has refused," answered Judith.

"I intend that he shall come." His tone was dogged.

Judith looked at him in surprise.

"Why should you want him?"

"He has no real reason for refusing."

"Surely that is his affair?"

"No, it isn't."

"You can't exactly force him to accept an invitation he doesn't want to accept."

"I can—through you."

Judith gave him a quick, uneasy look.

"I can—through you," repeated Jason. "You are to ask him to come down."

"Victor! I can't do such a thing! He doesn't want to come."

"You are to ask him to."

"That would put me in an intolerable position!"

"You like the man, don't you?"

"Yes, but——"

"And he likes you, that's plain enough. Well, if you tell him that you want him to come with us, he'll come."

Judith was nonplussed. This was so utterly unexpected. And what could be the reason of it? Why should Jason be so keen on James Barry coming to Cornwall with them? And how in the world could she go to him, to any man, after he had refused definitely, and beg him, on her account, to change his mind! It was humiliating; ridiculous. But Jason would listen to no argument.

"You will ask him to come with us and you will *make* him come with us," he said, his eyes dark and menacing. "Or . . ." He left the alternative unspoken.

Judith gave up her protest at that, chilled suddenly as that threat always chilled her.

She slept very little that night for thinking about the preposterous position he had put her in. How was she to do it and why was Jason so keen on it? Perhaps that part of the problem nagged at her more even than the other.

Next evening Jason asked her about it.

"I don't know how to do it!" she cried in answer to his questions.

"Ring him up at his hotel and ask him to call," he told her.

"Can't you see what a hateful thing it is to have to do?"

"I want it done."

Rather desperately she did it, there and then, only to learn that Barry had gone into the country to his farm and wouldn't be in town again for some time. She told Jason this with triumph, as if the question were automatically disposed of. But he only said:

"Well, you know where the farm is."

Judith stared at him. Even *he* surely could not mean that she was to go to the farm!

But that is just what he did mean. He insisted upon it. And next morning he ordered the car for her and sent her off. She sat straight in the luxuriously upholstered Rolls, looking before her at the correct back of the perfect chauffeur—a back that always irritated her by its sheer correctness; so immovable, when she was in such a turmoil of emotion!

What was she going to say to James Barry? How explain this action of hers? To have to beg a man to come and stay with them when he had so definitely declined. It was an impossible thing to do!

Engrossed in these thoughts, the miles slid by unnoticed, and almost before she knew it the white gates of Darley's Farm came into view, and next moment the car had turned into the drive and was drawing up by the wide porch. No one appeared to be about and she hoped that Barry was not there. With her heart beating hard she went up to the door, and knocked.

The sound of footsteps made her heart beat faster

still, and when Barry himself in his shirt sleeves, his hands rather grubby, opened the door and stood struck silent with surprise at seeing her, she wished that the ground might open and swallow her.

Then he said:

"Mrs. Jason! How ripping of you to come and see my farm. Is Jason with you?"

"No," she replied, steadying her lips with an effort. "No, he isn't. May I come in just for a moment?"

She looked so troubled that he asked anxiously if she were ill. She shook her head.

"I just want to see you. To speak to you."

"Come in. Excuse the bareness and the general mess. I'm in the middle of painting and cleaning and so on," he said, and he led the way into a low-ceilinged old-time room that was sweet with the scent of the honeysuckle that clustered round its open windows.

She stood looking round her, her hands locked together, trying to be calm and easy.

"Are you doing the renovating all yourself?" she asked at last.

"No; that would be too big a job. But I'm helping. I must have something to do."

"It's hard work, isn't it?"

"Oh! scarcely that. But one can keep at it, and that's the main thing."

"Don't you ever rest and take things quietly?"

He turned away and looked out through the open window and for a moment was silent. Then:

"Sometimes one needs action, not quiet. Do sit down."

He pulled up a plain oak, rush-seated chair and

she sat down, still twisting her fingers together. She looked, he thought, very like a nervous child; a nervous, tragic-eyed child who had had some big and by no means childish trouble thrust upon her. He didn't speak, just stood by the table looking down at her, and, to make it seem that he was not too pointedly waiting for her to explain her visit, he filled his pipe and lit it. She looked up suddenly.

"Mr. Barry, is there any very big reason why you don't want to come down to Cornwall?" The words came with a rush, as if she had screwed her courage to the sticking point and must speak while it was still high.

The question startled him, but he answered it quietly.

"Well, yes, there is."

"Very big?" she persisted.

"It seems big enough to me."

"Oh, you must think me utterly mad!" There was the quiver of tears in her voice.

He leaned down suddenly and caught her straining hands in his, holding them closely, with comforting strength.

"No, I don't think that. But I do think you are horribly troubled. Will you tell me about it?"

She looked up into his face, her eyes imploring.

"I'm going to ask you such a . . . such an absurd thing," she said breathlessly. "Will you please try to understand?"

He kept her hands in his as he answered.

"I'll honestly try." He smiled too; that sweet, encouraging smile of his that always seemed to help her. She let her hands rest in his quite slackly and

easily. The touch of him was such strength and comfort.

"I mean will you understand without . . . *questioning?*"

"I'll try," he said again.

"I want you to . . . to change your mind and come down to Cornwall after all. Will you?"

For a moment there was dead silence in the room, while their eyes met holdingly. Then he slowly straightened and drew away, letting her hands slide through his.

"Yes," he said at last.

For some reason that broke her down and she bent forward, crying.

"Judith!" The name broke from him. "You mustn't cry. You mustn't! There's nothing in the world that's worth it. . . ." The words shook away raggedly.

She quieted almost at once. Dried her eyes and looked up again. His face was working queerly; a tense expression round his lips suggested that he was holding words in check that were clamouring for utterance.

"I can only thank you," she said shakenly.

"You don't have to." His voice was rather gruff.

"Is it putting you out most dreadfully? Stopping all your work here? And interfering with your . . . reasons?"

"My reasons were selfish ones; weak and selfish. Don't think of them. If it will help you for me to come down to Cornwall, that is all that matters and I'll come."

She rose and went towards the door without looking at him.

"Again, I can only thank you," she said, in a voice so low that he only just caught the words.

He went with her to the car and aided her in, and stood bare-headed in the mellow sunlight until the car turned out into the lane and out of sight.

Judith leaned back into her corner as limply as if she were exhausted from a spell of heavy physical labour. It was over; she had done it. And how wonderful he had been! Never a word, never the smallest hint, that her request was even the least unusual. Just that marvellous, ready helpfulness. That unquestioning acquiescence. Words that she had read somewhere, sometime, came into her mind:

He that is thy friend indeed,
He will help thee in thy need.

James Barry was her friend indeed!

When she told Jason that evening that Barry was coming to Cornwall with them, he only said:

"I told you he would, if *you* asked him to."

Chapter XIII

JASON took Judith back to Porthverris on the following day and Barry joined them there the day after. Judith was nervous and ill at ease, thinking that he must, in spite of his extraordinary degree of understanding, be puzzled as to why she should have asked him so urgently to come down. But by making it seem that he was an ordinary guest upon the most ordinary visiting terms, he managed to dispel her awkwardness.

"I'm glad you changed your mind and came along after all," said Jason towards the end of dinner. "I've still got a certain amount of business to settle up before we can leave, so I shall expect you and Judy to amuse each other without me." He gave them each a glance.

Judith coloured to the roots of her hair and Jason smiled. Barry didn't smile; he just said smoothly:

"I'm entirely at Mrs. Jason's service."

"That's obliging," said Jason dryly.

Judith escaped as soon as she could, leaving them to smoke; wondering, rather feverishly, what they would talk about, left to themselves. Were they friends? She couldn't believe that they were. And if they were not, what was Jason's motive in insisting upon having Barry with them? She was afraid of any action of Jason's that she could not readily explain.

For two days she was with Barry nearly all the time. Jason shut himself into his study with his secretary and sent them off to explore the rugged beauties of the coast on their own.

"And don't let me see anything more of you till luncheon," he would say in a playful way that came queerly from him and made Judith suspicious. Why should he want her to be with Barry? Why should he deliberately throw them together? It was not immediately that the answer came to this question, and when it did it hit her like a blow between the eyes. She had gone into the drawing-room to find Barry and saw him standing at the window looking out into the hot sunshine of a clear July day, so abstracted that she had to call to him to make him notice her. At the sound of her voice he wheeled round and cried:

"Judith!" and then caught a breath as if he would have caught back the name and the tone of it if he could.

They stood looking at each other, eyes searching eyes, heart suddenly calling to heart. And in that moment she knew his heart, and her own, and nearly cried out in dismay at the discovery she had made.

Barry loved her and she loved him.

Up in her own room only a moment later she was desperately trying to get this new perplexity sorted out.

She found now that it was nothing as new as she had imagined. She had always loved him, right from the first day in the rose garden. Of course she had. That's why the thought of him had carried such comfort. But she'd never thought of its being love before; had never called it love. And now he . . .

Was that why he hadn't wanted to come down here with them? Was that his "reason"? The reason he had condemned as selfish and cowardly? Yes, she believed it was. He had realized that he loved her and had been trying to avoid her. And she had gone to him and forced him, literally forced him, to come down here and be with her all the time! Her cheeks burned hotly. He had cried out her name that day, as he had cried it out to-day, only she had been deaf to the meaning of it then. To-day he had been taken completely by surprise; off his guard and his voice and his eyes had betrayed him. If she could read his face so clearly what had he read in hers? Her heart beat almost painfully hard. They loved each other. It seemed to her now that their love was a thing ordained; inevitable; the seeds of it planted in their hearts with the first meeting of their eyes. Yes, even when he had seemed to take so little interest in her that she had called herself a cross-eyed Hottentot. . . . A cross-eyed Hottentot! She spoke the ridiculous words half aloud, through trembling lips, tears coming into her eyes. For a moment she let the tears fall unchecked; then dabbed them away, angry with herself for her weakness. If there was one thing she must not do in this crisis it was give way; lose her head and her nerve and let it prove too much for her. But what a catastrophic sort of muddle it all was! It just needed this, she told herself with a touch of bitter humour; just needed this to round off the general tragedy of it!

If only she had known that she loved Barry before she married Jason! For a while that thought held sway, turning her hot with impotent agony. But it

gave way to resolution again and she was presently calm enough to think.

The best thing would be for Barry to go, she supposed, but how, after making him come down here, was she now to make him go? And again, would Jason allow it? That thought was only halfway through her mind when another big revelation came sheer out of space with the force of a blow, and she knew why Jason had made her get Barry here; and why, now that he was here, he threw them together so much: he had seen that Barry cared.

And herself? Had he seen that too, even before *she* knew it? She could believe anything of his almost uncanny power of sensing things. So that was it! That was it! The sudden knowledge brought her to her feet, one hand closed to a fist, thrust tight into the other palm. He was torturing them with each other; throwing them eternally together and looking on with eyes dark with sinister amusement! It was a devilish form of comedy to him. Good heavens, where did the fiendish ingenuity of the man end?

But this helped to put her on her mettle and she put in a calm and composed appearance at lunch, ready to meet anything. Barry too was steady again now, although rather more grave than usual. Did Jason suspect that anything out of the ordinary had happened? Judith couldn't be sure. He had just as fine a talent for hiding his own feelings as for discovering the feelings of others.

Stormy weather delayed the cruise, and the days passed by with the tension between them all as high as it could go.

The situation imposed a tremendous strain, and

there were moments, many of them, when it seemed impossible not to break down beneath it, but somehow Judith never did.

"Why not get happiness out of it?" she thought desperately. "Jim and I love each other. Why be tortured with each other? Why not be happy together?" She tried to be, but it was too dangerous to be successful, and only drove the torment to an unendurable limit.

She wished desperately, sometimes, that he didn't care, and was in a panic lest he shouldn't. She wanted him to go, yet dreaded life without him.

A crisis was reached one day when Jason asked Barry to explore the Porthverris rocks with a view to finding out whether there was a channel of sufficient width and depth to take his yacht out into the open sea on the sheltered side instead of the difficult one.

"My skipper, old Stephen Trepol, swears there isn't, and never has been, but I'm always fighting him," he said with a laugh. "It's calmed down a bit to-day and Judy would love to explore with you."

Barry turned his eyes full upon Judith.

"Would you?" he asked in such a point-blank manner that she was startled.

"Well, I—don't know," she began doubtfully.

Jason laughed and said:

"Oh, I *know* she would love it," and his dark eyes went from her to Barry. "I *know* she would love it," he repeated, and now he smiled slightly, his eyes coming to rest upon Judith's face.

Judith knew what he meant and said:

"Well, since Victor knows I would love it, I suppose I would. Shall we start?" Her air of indifference was well done, but it was far from being genuine.

Barry, with another quick look, agreed.

They maintained an almost complete silence as they made their way down to the rocky shore and walked across a stretch of sand to the Porthverris rocks which jutted up jaggedly against the deep blue of the midsummer sky. Judith had a feeling that a crisis was near; it seemed to hover above them like some winged thing, ready to swoop. Barry's face and manner were not reassuring; his lips were closed to a line and there was a strange look in his eyes. Obviously he was occupied deeply with his thoughts, and she wondered, half afraid, what they might be. Reaching the rock, Barry indicated the space between them and the shore with a gesture.

"There's the channel Jason is so interested in," he said.

Something careless and contemptuous in the words made her look at him sharply. As plainly as if it were written in letters upon his face, she saw that he regarded the channel as a flimsy excuse of Jason's; saw that he didn't believe in it for one moment. Her face went scarlet.

"Wouldn't any ordinary chart on the coast line have given him all he needed to know?" she asked abruptly.

He turned towards her, looking squarely into her eyes.

"Yes," he said.

She caught a breath.

"So that it was entirely unnecessary to . . . come and . . . explore it?" Her words were scarcely audible.

"Entirely." He left it at that.

Of course, she had known that the channel was an excuse to get them here together, but now Barry knew and was telling her so. She was humiliated at every turn. Tears rose into her eyes, but she blinked them away. She mustn't give way; mustn't let the crisis swoop and overwhelm her.

"Victor is awfully strange," she said, her lips trembling.

"Very."

"But," she went on with a sort of desperate attempt at easy lightness—"but I suppose he had *some* reason for suggesting that you should . . ." She broke off.

"Oh, no doubt he had a reason." Barry's tone was grim.

Tears stung in her eyes afresh, but again she blinked them away.

"And that you should come with me," he added.

Her face went hot again. Could he think that she was a willing party to Jason's unforgivable behaviour? For a moment she feared this must be so; his tone had been so short and sharp. But glancing at him she saw that he had been speaking straight out of the thoughts that were absorbing him and that he was scarcely aware that she was there to hear him. She looked out over the rock-broken sands to the line of the sea which was just creeping towards them again on the turn of the tide. Jason's big white schooner, the *White Crest,* was riding at anchor just at the

mouth of Porthverris harbour; a thing of perfect lines.

Suddenly Barry laughed and startled her.

"We were told to explore. Let's explore," he said.

Neither the laugh nor the words came naturally. Troubled, she tried to laugh in response.

"Very well; let's," she said, a tremble in her voice.

Methodically he climbed every crag and ledge; investigated every crevice and cranny.

She followed him, wondering at his manner, for he seemed suddenly almost boyishly gay and exuberant. And yet there was nothing gay in the way he said:

"Never let it be said that we didn't do *strictly* as we were told." That was hard and bitter, even though he laughed again as he said it.

She looked out at the approaching line of the sea with almost anguished eyes. What was Barry thinking? Of Jason; of herself? She followed him into a narrow cave, and here in the dim light he faced her and said:

"Judith, Jason's doing all this on purpose. What's it for? What's it all about? I must know. You've got to tell me. I'm . . . pretty well at the end of my endurance . . ."

His voice broke with feeling, and without being able to see his face clearly, she yet almost *felt* the storm that was working within him. Tears sprang to her eyes again and pressed hard upon her throat. But she must not cry. She had told herself that over and over again. Must not, must not. But in spite of that she was crying, quietly, heart-brokenly. Crying as she hadn't cried for months. Then she felt hands upon her shoulders; strong hands; almost rough

hands; and was pulled into Barry's arms to lean, sobbing, upon his breast. He held her fast; fiercely; hungrily; and his voice, ragged and odd, was stumbling into broken words of soothing.

"Judith . . . don't cry. My dear, I didn't mean to hurt you . . . upset you . . . worry you. Dear, *my* dear, don't cry . . ."

But she couldn't stop. She just lay limp in his arms, the tension snapped, her courage gone.

"Tell me what's wrong. Tell me what the trouble is. I've seen it; known it . . . and cannot find the clue to it. Judith, what is Jason doing? What does he mean by it? You are wretched with him. A blind man could see that! What is the meaning of it all?"

She found a ghostly trail of a voice with which to answer:

"Don't question . . . I'm a fool . . . weak . . . tired. . . . But I'm all right now: I am really."

Another storm of sobbing utterly belied her words. And now she clung to him like a terrified child, afraid of the questions he was asking; afraid of what she might say.

"Judith, it's beyond endurance!" he cried, live agony in his voice. "I've lived with you here now for a week, and the whole time has been one long questioning: What is it? What is the matter? What's at the root of it all? And it's a nightmare to be so utterly in the dark about it."

"I can't tell! Mustn't! Daren't!" she gasped out. "Oh, *don't* ask! Don't . . . I beg you. . . ." Her hands clung to him for a moment longer; then, almost as if her fear had turned her now against him, she raised a white, stricken face and strove to free

herself. . . . "Oh, what have we done. . . . What *have* we done!" she cried brokenly.

He uttered an: "Oh, God!" and released her quickly, and they stood looking at each other through the dusky light of the cave. Then she bowed her head and covered her face with her hands. She didn't cry any more, but the anguish of her spirit seemed to Barry to be more poignantly expressed by this silence than it could possibly have been in even the wildest storm of tears. He wanted to speak but, with all his heart on his lips, couldn't find words. This had happened; that was all. He'd taken her in his arms; she'd clung to him. He knew that she loved him as certainly as he had known for many long months that he loved her. Exaltation in that, which a quick memory of Jason brought down and reduced to ashes. She drew a breath presently and raised her face, so white and unhappy that his heart was wrenched with pity. His impulse was to tell her not to speak of it any more; not to think; just to cut him out; forget him. Anything than that she should suffer this white-faced agony; anything, if it would make things easier for her. And he was on the verge of saying this when a sudden gentle lapping of water over the doorstep, as it were, of the cave, brought things back to the practical with a rush and made him start round and go quickly to the opening and look out.

He found that the sea had reached their level and was threatening to invade the cave altogether. Very quickly he took off his shoes and socks, rolled up his trousers and climbed out on the nearest ledge. As far as he could see, water was surrounding them. What a fool he'd been not to notice that the bay was

as flat as the palm of your hand, and that once the tide reached its level it would take only a matter of minutes to fill and reach the shore!

He turned back and called to Judith. "Judith, the tide's in, and I believe we're cut off. Give me my shoes, will you? And come here so that I can help you out."

His new and entirely practical tone was immensely steadying. She picked up the shoes and thrust them up to him. He took them and deposited them on a ledge of rock above his head. Then stooped so that his big shoulders were in the cave.

"Do just as I tell you, and I'll try to hoist you out without getting your feet wet."

She obeyed him in silence and, with her hands clasped round his neck, was pulled up to the narrow little platform upon which he was standing.

"Get wet?" he asked, releasing her, looking down at her shoes.

"No. Thank you," she answered quietly. Perhaps they both felt that the rising of the tide had come as a rather blessed intervention, even if the thought didn't express itself in actual words. She raised her eyes. "Is it all round us?" she asked.

"Must be, I'm afraid. But I'm going to have a look to make sure. Climb up there and wait for me a moment." He saw her safely up to a higher ledge and clambered round the bluff of the rocks to get a view of the shore side. When he came back he called up to her:

"Yes, it's all round us. Are these rocks ever covered?"

"They may be at the spring tides, but not ordi-

narily. I know, because I can see them from the window of my room. I often watch the gulls." Her voice was subdued and trailing, as if she were tired.

"What a fool I was not to realize what would happen! And I've been caught on the Maplins, too!" He laughed slightly and drew himself up swingingly beside her.

"It didn't occur to me, either. I'm not very wise about these things," she said.

Suddenly he found himself thinking:

"I'll bet anything it occurred to Jason, though." He didn't know where the thought came from; just found it in his mind, and it brought a flood of understanding with it. Also, it scattered any impulse he might have felt to let Judith off a discussion of things. He looked round at her, his face hard and resolute.

"We are here for some hours," he said, in a short, clipped way. "And there's a good deal we've got to say. We may as well say it." She closed her eyes and turned away her head. "No, my dear, it's no good shirking. Something has happened that we've got to face. This ledge is dry; sit down; lean back; get comfy."

But she remained standing, uncertain and distressed.

"Jim!" She had never used his first name before, and the very sound of it seemed to implore him. "There's nothing I *can* say. Please do believe me. I shall only hurt you; make it all the worse by having to be mysterious."

"Why can't you tell me? Don't you know I would never betray you?"

"You know it isn't that!" she protested. "I've always trusted you, deeply, absolutely from the first moment we met!"

"Thank you for that, Judith. And you may trust me, my dear. Perhaps it isn't easy for you to believe that after . . ."

She knew he was referring to what had happened in the cave, but she silenced the finish of his sentence with a little gesture.

"That was my fault, too. I vowed I wouldn't cry. But things seemed too much for me. I suppose few men can endure a woman's tears; they either irritate him or . . ."

"Go to his head," put in Barry. "Well, your tears went to my head. But then I love you pretty seriously, and . . ."

"Does it make things any easier for us to say all this?" she cried.

"We *know* it, don't we? And *did* know it before it was said."

"Yes."

"And making things easier isn't always the best, or even the *easiest* way, in the end." He stood looking down at her, and saw that she drew a quick breath, clasped her hands together nervily and then let them fall slackly to her sides.

"We aren't children, Judith," he went on. "We're a full-grown man and woman. On the other hand, we are both young and still have the best years of life before us."

She raised her eyes quickly.

"But life, for me, is . . . what you have seen! I *can't* get out of it. There's no *way* out."

"How can I be sure of that if I know nothing?"

"*I* am sure of it. *I* know it. And I'm telling you."

"There is such a thing as being too close to a situation to be able to see it."

"That doesn't apply here. Honestly, Jim. Heavens above, don't you think I'd tell you if I could!"

"I'm bullying you. Nagging you. But I can't help it. I must find out what to do," he said with a touch of doggedness.

"There isn't anything to do. There simply isn't. Oh, Jim, do believe me! You don't understand, but just believe me. It's even dangerous to be saying as much as I am saying. *Dangerous!* Do you understand?" Her voice broke hysterically and her mouth quivered.

He said again:

"Sit down, my dear. Lean back and rest a minute."

She obeyed then; curled down upon the rough edge and leaned back against a wall of rock behind. He took off his coat, folded it and pushed it gently behind her back. Then he sat beside her, and instead of speaking immediately, he proceeded to put on his socks and shoes again. That done, he pulled out his pipe, lit it, and sat silently smoking.

"This," he said suddenly, out of a long silence—"this isn't a case of a frivolous woman and a philandering man, giving way to a light emotion and calling it by grand names. You aren't that type of woman and I'm not that type of man."

"No." Her voice came quietly now and he was relieved at the tone of it.

"And being a full-grown man and woman with nothing strikingly light about either of us, we can go

into this question soberly, with our intelligences, not our emotions, uppermost."

"But I can still tell you nothing. That's . . . *part* of it, Jim."

"I'll not ask you to say a thing. I'll ask you just to listen to me, to begin with."

She smiled slightly, which lightened his spirits wonderfully.

"Remember my telling you that you had courageous eyes, Judith?"

"Remember?" she echoed. "Jim, I believe I've pretty nearly *lived* on that, sometimes."

"Then I've given you something, even if I've distressed you a lot."

"You've given me the best I've ever known."

He blew a cloud of blue smoke into the air and after a moment said:

"Thank you, again, my dear. Now, it's my belief, my very firm belief, that you are one of the pluckiest things ever made. I adore your pluck. I believe I very nearly worship it, but I absolutely curse it, too."

She sat straight at that and looked at him wide-eyed.

He leaned towards her and said slowly:

"Because I believe it has made you go through with things that no woman on earth ought to have been called upon to go through with. With a little less courage, you *wouldn't* have gone through with them; you'd have quailed and refused and—been spared a tremendous lot."

"You've got it all wrong, Jim," she said shakily. "I hadn't the courage to quail and refuse. I tried and couldn't."

"Courageous people can't. They don't know why and no one else knows why, but they just can't."

He smoked again for a while in silence. The sound of the sea breaking into a fuss and fume around the rocks was rhythmic and soothing.

"First of all," he said after a while, "there's the fact of your being married."

She glanced at him quickly.

He went on: "On the surface of it, I'm telling a married woman that I love her."

"Yes." Her word was hardly audible.

"Well, you know as well as I do that is not a habit of mine."

"Of course I know that."

"Then that point is settled. We are agreed that we are neither of us outstandingly dishonourable." He smiled a little, but his tone was serious. "I've loved you for a good while now, Judith; before I came home this time. So it must have begun in the rose garden that first day we met."

"Only neither of us knew," she put in rather sombrely.

"Why didn't I pick you up and carry you off that day?"

"Just because neither of us knew."

"Well, I didn't, anyway. I went off and left you. But I thought of you a lot, in a pleasant cool way, rather as one thinks of a pool of crystal clear water, when one is in the thick of a particularly fetid jungle. You were something quite separate and apart from everyone else I knew."

"I know exactly what you mean, Jim. Because that was my way of thinking of you."

"Then one day I bagged a tiger. Got him first shot; cleanest kill I've ever made. And right at the top of my elation I said to myself, 'I wish Judith Connor could have seen that!' Now, I've made some decent shots in my time, and it's never worried me two hoots that none but a bunch of native beaters has known anything about it. So I knew it was something very unusual that made me want to show off to you as a mighty hunter. Then it came to me; I loved you. And after that it was the same with everything: an exceptional sunset, a moonrise over the sea, a storm; no matter what it might happen to be, I wished Judith Connor could share it with me." He paused, took his pipe from his teeth, looked down at it with unseeing eyes and absently pressed down the tobacco with a lean forefinger.

Judith, looking at him, all her heart going out to him, couldn't speak. After a moment he went on:

"And I was going to tell you about it when I saw you again in the rose garden. Only that all went wrong . . . as you know." Again he paused; then, with a quick change of tone:

"Well, no good thinking of what might have been; we've got enough to do to tackle what is."

She didn't answer. As far as she could see, and she was very convinced that she saw as far as the whole question went, there was no tackling the situation at all.

"I've given you my side of it," he went on presently. "Now, since you cannot give me yours, I'm going to give you what I *think* is yours."

He heard her draw a breath, as if she braced herself for what was coming, but she made no protest;

just waited in silence. When he spoke, he spoke slowly, thoughtfully, and his eyes looked straight ahead of him, across the bay to the open sea.

"Whatever it was that happened, didn't happen until after that first day we met. Otherwise you would have told me about it."

She broke in.

"I believe if I'd told you all that I was feeling, the depression and wretchedness . . . I believe you wouldn't have gone away so soon. . . . If only I had!"

She didn't know just what that did to him. The knowledge that something she could have told him that day, and didn't, could have saved all this, seemed for a moment to take him by the throat. But when he spoke he only said:

"Courage again! That wonderful—damnable—impulse not to squeal!"

Silence held for some minutes; then:

"Well, my dear, you *didn't* tell me and I went away and somehow—I'm not clear as to exactly how—things so arranged themselves that Jason can tell you what you are to do and be very sure that you will do it."

She turned away, afraid that he would read in her eyes how dead upon the truth he was hitting.

"Somehow," he added, "he has got your life into his hands, and it is his to do what he likes with. His to *break,* if it pleases him; and if something doesn't happen to stop him." That was said slowly.

She turned terrified eyes upon him, with a look he answered before she had time to speak.

"Oh, I know that a condition of it all is that you

reveal nothing. Well, you haven't revealed anything. Whatever I know I have guessed. From *him*, too; not from you. It is *he* I have been watching. His methods are curious. Why, for example, should he insist upon you asking me down here? You needn't tell me whether he *did* insist upon it or not. I believe he did. And now that I'm here, why does he throw us always together? To-day—do you believe that the idea of our being caught by that sudden tide hadn't occurred to him? I believe it had. I feel sure it had. But what is the purpose behind it?" He broke off. "No, I'm not asking you. I'm asking myself. I don't understand it." He paused; then added, "But I mean to."

She didn't speak for some time; then she said in a low voice:

"You have guessed so much; seen so much. Do as you will about it; only remember that any moment may bring . . . all that I dread . . . all that I have suffered for. And I have suffered, Jim. It's no good pretending to you that I haven't."

"My dear, I know it. That day I saw you again, with him, in the rose garden. All in white . . . his wife. . . ." Barry's voice gave out for a moment, and he finished after a space of silence: "I felt that I was looking right into the face of tragedy. But don't be afraid. I shall not say a word to let him think that you have told me anything; it will be easy, for the simple reason that you haven't."

"I trust you utterly, Jim." It was all she could say. And all that was needed.

"I think we've cleared the air of a lot of thunder, don't you?" He smiled round at her, speaking briskly.

Suddenly he rose, let out a shout and waved his arms above his head.

"A man on the shore," he explained, and added, as a minute figure on the mainland waved in reply: "Got him!"

"First shot, too, like the tiger," she said with a slight laugh.

He laughed down at her in quick response.

"And Judith is here to see the great bag this time," he said.

Chapter XIV

THE figure proved to be an ancient but highly active fisherman, who was presently to be seen standing up in a small boat and propelling it over the water towards them by means of a single oar over the stern.

When he could get a good hold on a jag of rock, he looked up and addressed Barry with toothless cheeriness.

"Hullaw, m'dear! You don't belong to be on the rocks when 'e come rollin' in." He waved a gnarled hand in the direction of the open ocean; " 'e," Barry gathered, being his disrespectful way of referring to the mighty Atlantic.

"I've known these rocks covered over many a time," he added, shifting his chew of tobacco from one side of his mumbly mouth to the other.

"Luckily for us, we saw you in time," said Barry, flattering subtly enough.

They climbed down into the boat and the ancient one pushed off and began to send the board towards the shore again at a really remarkable speed.

"It's a turr'ble bit o' coast round here; that's what it do be," he said. Experience had taught him that "foreigners" liked the Cornish coast to live up to its reputation. "There ain't even a good 'arbour 'ereabouts. When they did build our 'arbour down along" —he indicated the direction by a skilful squirt of tobacco juice over the gunwale—"they didn' build

the arms for to go far enough roun'. 'Tain't no good 'arbour; 'tain't no good 'arbour at all. 'E do come rollin' in with such a rush. Once 'e reaches that point out there . . ." another squirt of tobacco juice showed them which point he meant. "It's nawthin' but a matter o' minutes 'fore 'e be touchin' the shore! No, 'tain't no good 'arbour at all." The ancient one mumbled on garrulously.

"I don't like the look of it certainly," said Barry. "Once a stiff sou'wester gets going I should think the water piles up against the rocks pretty quickly."

"That's just what 'e do do," agreed the old man. "I've known a gal' o' wind come sweepin' in 'ere an' lift a sixty-foot fishing smack right up in the air, an' smack 'er down again, 'igh and dry on they cliffs, keel up'ards."

Whatever truth there might be in this story had been entirely obscured by the embroidery of thirty years' constant telling.

"It's certainly an ugly looking place and I can believe anything of it," said Barry with tactful acceptance of the yarn.

"There ain't nawthin' can live in a real, proper gale hereabouts. 'E do come rollin' in. That's what 'e do do."

They parted on the rocky mainland with great friendliness, and Judith and Barry made their way up to the house.

Jason met them in the hall. There was a look in his eyes which Judith knew well, and just the suspicion of that smile she dreaded on his lips.

"Caught by the tide?" he asked pleasantly. He asked Judith, but it was Barry who answered.

"Yes. It's a pity you didn't warn me of that sudden, quick tide, Jason." The eyes of the two men met.

Judith, with a quick glance from one to the other, slid past them and went upstairs to her room. When she had disappeared, Barry jerked his head in the direction of the living-room.

"I'd like to speak to you, Jason," he said quietly, and led the way into the room.

Rather to his surprise, Jason followed him quietly, closed the door and waited. They stood looking at each other steadily. Then:

"Jason," said Barry at last, "just exactly what's your game?"

Jason's dark eyes questioned him.

"My game?"

"When a man sees that another man is in love with his wife, he generally does all he can to keep them apart." Barry's words fell slowly and with deep intention. "But *you* . . ." He left the rest unspoken.

"So you love my wife?" Jason's face as he asked the wholly superfluous question was inscrutable.

Barry tried searchingly to read it, and failed.

"You know I love your wife!" he said abruptly.

"Yes, I do know it, and I do not blame you in the least. I think she is a most unusual and—lovable—girl. But I'm sorry, Barry, for you. Because, you see, she is my wife."

"I'm not forgetting that. Whatever may happen, be very sure that it will not happen before I *forget* that she is your wife. It will more likely be because I am too forcibly reminded of it."

"Are you threatening?"

"No. Stating a case."

The look between them was holding steadily and it did not falter now.

"I trust you entirely, my dear fellow." Jason's voice was smoothly ironical.

"And I trust you as I'd trust a wild animal; no more and no less. I hope you get that clearly. It's important."

That ended the interview.

Judith did not know what had happened between them until that same evening. Jason came to her room when she was dressing for dinner. Standing by the dressing-table, he watched her for a moment in silence, while she put the finishing touches to her cloudy dark hair. She looked up and challenged him.

"Well?"

"Has it ever struck you that your friend Barry is a fine, straight fellow?" he asked slowly.

"I think that is a good deal why he is my friend," she returned.

"Do you know that he's pretty desperately in love with you?"

Judith drew a breath and it was one of the most difficult things she had ever done just to keep her eyes looking up straight into his. But she did it and, secretly, he admired her for it.

"Yes," she said at last. "I do know that."

"Do you want to keep him here, tagging at your heels?"

"It is not *I* who am keeping him here. It was not I who ever asked him here."

"Would you like to tell him that he is free to go?"

For a moment she looked at him, trying to see beyond the words to what lay behind them.

"Are you ordering me to tell him to go?" she demanded.

"No. I don't mind whether he goes or stays. He is a perfectly honourable man."

"In dealing with a marriage such as ours, he might not feel himself bound by that particular brand of honour."

"And you?"

"I am bound by fear. I have never made any pretence about that."

"What does he know of our marriage?"

"Only what anyone with eyes must see for himself."

"That you are not happy with me?" That came slowly.

"Not alone that. Jim has seen beyond that."

"You call him Jim, do you?"

"Oh, yes, I call him Jim and he calls me Judith!"

"And he has seen?"

"A good deal."

"What have you told him?"

"Nothing. Except that I don't want him to try to discover anything."

"Nothing else?"

She rose from her chair before the mirror, holding her silk dressing-gown around her.

"You still hold Pat's confession, you know," she said crisply.

He stood quite still, but his dark eyes followed her as she moved to her bed where her frock was laid out in readiness for her.

"Judy, suppose I were to tear up that confession of

Pat's. . . . What would you do?" The words seemed to drop weightily into the silence.

She turned so swiftly that he was startled and her eyes were blazing.

"I think I'd *curse* you for doing it!" she cried, her voice low and quivering. "For making all that I have gone through good for nothing, meaningless. I think I'd curse you for putting me through the degradation of this marriage with you and then making it needless!"

She drew a sharp breath and turned away quickly.

He still said nothing. She spoke again, stooping to pick up her frock.

"No I wouldn't." The contradicition came bitterly. "I'd be grateful for small mercies and leave you."

"Leave me?" he repeated. "Leave all that I can give you?"

She laughed scornfully.

"Give me? No one can give me back this last year of life that you have stolen from me."

There was a prolonged silence. Then: "What I admire about you and Barry is your utter honesty," he said. "Well, as you say, I still have the power."

She said nothing.

"You can tell him to go or let him stay, exactly as you like," he added.

"Without penalty?" she asked quickly.

"Without penalty," he answered.

She looked at him searchingly for a moment, then, rather wonderingly, came to the conclusion that he meant this.

"Thank you," she said quietly, and he left her with no further word.

Next morning she spoke to Barry about it when they were in the drawing-room alone.

"Would it make things easier if you were to go, Jim?" she asked, coming to the point abruptly.

"You have permission to let me go?" he asked with a touch of irony.

"I simply suggest that it might be easier."

"Thanks, my dear. But it wouldn't. Do you mind?"

"Mind?"

"My staying."

"No."

"I'm glad. Because all the furies in a massed attack couldn't drive me away from you now," he said slowly.

She uttered a laugh; not because she was amused; simply because she was startled.

"Very well. It's up to you, Jim," she said unsteadily. She stood for a moment not quite looking at him; then, with an odd little movement as if she twisted herself free of him, even though they stood half the room apart, she turned and went to the door. There she stopped, thinking; then turned back.

"And you still mean to come with us on the cruise?"

"If I have to fight Jason with both fists to get aboard! Yes, Judith, I still mean to come."

"Might you have to fight him?" she asked, troubled.

"Is he so keen on my being here—since yesterday?"

She didn't answer that immediately; then she said that she wasn't sure.

"Jason is afraid of me now, Judith. Not in any way that you have thought of, probably, but . . ."

"Are you afraid of him?" she broke in.

"No. I'm—you'll hate me for this—I'm *sorry* for him."

"Hate you? Oh, but Jim, I've been sorry for him for ages!"

He found her simple way of saying it profoundly touching.

"That's great—wonderful—of you, Judith," he said, and his voice was low and shaken with feeling.

"No. It just happens to be so. Well, I've said all I wanted to," she added hurriedly.

"And thank you for saying it," he answered as she went out of the room.

Just as she crossed the hall, she saw a telegraph boy coming up to the front door, and went to him.

The telegram he delivered was for her, from her father, telling her that her mother was ill again and that she had better come home. She sent an answer back saying that she would come at once, and then was in a panic lest Jason should forbid it. It would mean a further delay of the cruise and she was afraid that he wouldn't allow his plans to be upset again. But he agreed to let her go at once with perfect amiability. Best of all, he let her go alone. She had never known him so considerate and kind. Even through her anxiety for Mrs. Connor, she was amazed by it.

Before lunch time, she was on the train, and it only occurred to her when she was well on her way that her husband and Barry would be alone together at Porthverris. The thought worried her off and on during the eight hours of her journey, but once she

was at home, it was swept out of her mind by other things.

She was relieved to find that her mother was much better, although still looking frail and worn out, and still, of course, in bed.

"It's only my silly heart, Judy dear," Mrs. Connor said, as Judith stooped to kiss her. "But it's good to have you with me, all the same."

"Faith! but it's the bad turn she's had," Pat senior confided to Judith. "The bad, bad turn! The doctor scarcely out of the house for twenty-four hours and me with no sleep for two whole nights and days. Two whole nights and days, Judy!" It was in telling of his own sleeplessness that his fine voice showed the first sign of trembling.

"So I sent for ye, Judy, feeling it only my duty to do so. And it's calling down blessings I am, upon that husband of yours, for the bits of luxuries we've been able to give her. It's blessing the dear man I am; so I am!"

Judith was near to blessing him too. For her mother stood in need of things which only Jason's easiness with money made it possible to give her. She was able to lavish every possible comfort upon the little woman. This was one of her rewards. There were other moments of reward too. As when one evening she was sitting beside Mrs. Connor's bed, reading aloud from the newspaper, she saw that her mother was not really listening, but was looking at her, and yet past her, with a far-away expression in her faded eyes.

"I love my boy, but it's you I always turn to, Judy.

Dear girl! Dear, dear girl." Such love, and something more, in the thin, tired voice.

In that rare moment as she sat answering her mother's look with tear-filled eyes, it seemed to Judith that everything had been made most blessedly worth while.

One morning the post brought her a letter from Jason asking her to get some additional things for the *White Crest*. He appended a list, told her where to go, and finished by inquiring after Mrs. Connor.

Judith answered by return that she would give the order he asked her to and that her mother was so much better that she was to be sent into the country in charge of a nurse within the next few days. She finished:

"I am giving her everything she needs; everything she fancies. And the ability to do this, I owe entirely to you. Believe me, for this I am grateful."

She felt that she owed him that, whether he cared to get it or not. That same afternoon she went into the city to find the store he had directed her to go to.

She found it and was giving her orders when she became aware of a man leaning across a distant counter, examining some delicate and shining instruments that looked to her like compasses. But it wasn't until he looked up, at the sound of her voice, that she saw that he was David Rattray.

He abandoned whatever business he had been transacting and came to her quickly, his eyes shining with pleasure.

"Judith! It's you! I could hardly believe it!" he said, stammering slightly.

She greeted him warmly and they shook hands.

"Let's finish our business," she suggested then, "and have tea together, shall we?"

"Fine," he agreed.

When they went out into the street together, she was rather troubled to notice that his eyes still turned to her with all his old devout and hungry look. They went to the familiar tea-shop, and across the little table, she took note of the changes that the past months had wrought in him. Essentially, she was afraid that he had changed very little. Superficially, he was broader, more formed; less awkward in manner; but beneath these outward changes lay the same brooding, dreaming, fanatic spirit she remembered.

She had hoped that his first experience of real independence might have "brought him to earth." But she couldn't honestly believe that it had had this effect, and she was disappointed and worried.

"My God! But it's wonderful to be seeing you again!" he broke out suddenly. "It seemed as if it were going to be all eternity before I did."

She tried to take it lightly, but was too much aware that he had not meant it lightly and that he was not feeling lightly. She turned to his work and he answered her questions. Yes, he had done quite well; and he liked the work, and he had been with nice people. No, he hadn't fixed a new berth. Yes, he was looking for one. He talked, but there was no real conviction or interest in what he said, and she knew it. Something else was burning in his mind.

It flared up suddenly, as she had feared it would.

"Judith! I know what you have done. I know that you've married that man."

"Yes, David. I've married him."

"Well, don't try to talk of other things. Because I can't think of anything else!"

"It's rather useless to think of *that,* David," she said gently.

"I do think of it. Night and day. Ever since my aunt told me that it had happened."

"Oh, she told you?"

"Yes, other things, too."

"What else, David?"

"She says that you married him for his money."

Judith met his look.

"Do you believe that?"

"Of course I don't," he answered with a touch of impatience. He leaned across the little table. "She says that he married you, not because he cares a row of pins about you, but just to—torture you. She says that's the sort of man he is and that you'll find out some day, and that you're only getting what you deserve. My aunt is very bitter against you and that man."

Judith was shocked by the venom that must have been in Ratty's speech for it to make such an impression upon David.

He went on:

"Now I *know* you didn't marry him for money. You wouldn't. *Couldn't.* Some people can do those things, but not you. And I know you don't love him. I know that, Judith. And so, naturally, I know that something is hideously wrong. My aunt may be bitter, but remember that she has known Jason for years; worked for him for years. You get to know something of a man when you work for him."

So he argued and went on arguing, while she sat

silent, thinking; troubled and afraid. It was dangerous to feel things as burningly as he felt them. He seemed to her to be a thing driven by feeling; as if his obsessions were stronger than either his physical being or his character. She was sorry that they had met again.

"I waited four hours for you once, and he kept you from me. Am I only dreaming that I stood waiting for you for four hours? Waiting and wondering and hoping? Am I only dreaming that, Judith?"

"No, my dear, I know!" she cried, infinitely distressed. "That was a wretched business for both of us. But you mustn't feel things so terribly strongly, David."

"How can I help the way I'm made!"

That was just what she feared, that giving way; knuckling under to the passionate, uncontrolled streak in him that could see only along one immediate line, and swerved from it not one inch.

"I don't forget and I don't forgive," he finished. "I simply don't."

That brought a quick memory of Ratty passionately declaring that not the whole of time could be long enough to make her forget the damage Jason had done her. This boy was so like her! So terribly like her!

"But I'll set you free of him some day, Judith. I'll set you free of him."

"David!" she began, but checked herself. Any protest, any opposition only hardened his determination. Better say nothing, and hope that the intensity of his feeling might burn itself out, harmlessly.

When they parted later, she was thoroughly un-

happy. She didn't know what to do, and it was only as a forlorn hope that she went to see Miss Rattray the following afternoon.

Ratty welcomed her, at the door, with that cautious suspicion in her light eyes that Judith remembered well. As she followed her to the sitting-room, Judith felt a twinge of fear, as if she were still a typist and at the mercy of those light eyes.

"The great Mrs. Jason condescends to visit her husband's cast-off secretary," were Ratty's first words.

Judith coloured sensitively, but went straight to the point.

"I've come to you about David," she said quietly.

Miss Rattray shot her a quick look.

"What about him?"

"I saw him yesterday and . . ."

"He didn't tell me."

"We had tea together. May I sit down?"

"Yes."

Miss Rattray sat down too, facing Judith.

"Well?" she said sharply.

Judith leaned towards her, speaking earnestly.

"It wasn't wise, with a boy like David, to work on his feelings of resentment and enmity," she said slowly.

The light eyes narrowed to slits.

"Victor Jason?" said Ratty with odd triumph. "You are trying to spare him? To get *me* to spare him?"

"I know that you have every right to hate him, Ratty. But I'm thinking of David now. He's so highly strung that it's dangerous to give him a big

resentment to nurse up. He hates Victor, and you have encouraged that hate. Well, it's doing the boy terrible harm. Really terrible harm, Ratty."

Miss Rattray's face didn't change by so much as the quiver of an eyelid.

"I know what I'm doing and why I'm doing it," she said stonily.

"You may know why, but I don't believe you know what you are doing to David."

"Yes, I do."

"Then, Ratty, I implore you . . ."

"Afraid for that precious husband of yours?" cut in Ratty.

"No!" That came in round denial. It hadn't occurred to Judith that there was any danger to Jason. "I'm afraid for David. You are filling his heart with the bitterest hatred and it's doing him harm. Hate is always pretty ghastly, it always leaves scars, but to a nature like David's it's fatal, Ratty. It simply eats him up; destroys him. After all, Victor hasn't done anything to *him,* whatever *your* grievance may be."

"Hasn't he? My heavens! Hasn't he!" broke in Miss Rattray with a short laugh.

Judith drew back.

"Well, but he hasn't, surely?" she said, some of her positiveness frittering away.

"You don't know what you're talking about," said Ratty bluntly.

Judith had a sudden feeling that she had been talking out of darkness into darkness; that nothing she had said had meant anything. She waited in strained silence for Ratty to explain.

Suddenly Ratty raised her head with a queer, angular jerk.

"I never had a brother," she said abruptly.

For a moment Judith sat, puzzled; the abrupt announcement conveying nothing to her. Then she remembered and said:

"But I thought David . . ."

"I know you did; so did everyone—Jason included."

"Then . . . ?" Judith's heart was suddenly beating hard, although she didn't know what she expected and feared to hear.

"I had a sister. And I loved her. There's never been anything in the world I loved as I loved her. . . ." Miss Rattray drew a breath; her thin hands were knotted together in her lap; her lips quivered. "Victor saw her; wanted her; took her as he takes anything he wants. Broke her and then threw her aside. David is her son, and bearing him killed her. Her son and—Victor's." She stopped, and there was intense silence in the little room.

Then Judith leaned forward, caught her by the shoulders, almost shaking her.

"Ratty, this is true? This is the absolute truth?" she said in a tense whisper.

"So help me God!"

Silence again, while Judith loosened her hold upon the bony little shoulders and drew back again; slowly; her eyes never turning aside from those light eyes that looked back at her. For a moment she was too stunned to speak. Then:

"Does David know?" she asked.

The light eyes narrowed again.

"No," said Ratty slowly. "But he will. Believe me, he will."

There was a menace in that that brought Judith to her feet.

"Ratty! What d'you mean by that!" she cried.

Miss Rattray rose too.

"Just what I say. David shall know. What do you think all these years have meant to me, if not that?"

"Revenge? Is it revenge you are seeking? Then tell Victor! Tell . . . anyone . . . but not David. For his own sake, not David, Ratty!"

"Has Victor never spoken of David?"

"Only once, and then not in any way as if he knew. I don't believe he *does* know."

"Haven't you noticed that they are alike?"

"Not until this moment. Now I do. The same look in the eyes. . . . Oh, yes, I see it now!"

"You have no doubts that I am speaking the truth?"

"None. It couldn't have been a lie as you said it. I wish I could doubt it. Life is difficult and complicated enough . . ." She broke off, drawing a sharp breath. Then: "Why didn't you tell Victor years ago and get the business cleared up? How could you work for him all these years and keep this important thing from him?"

Miss Rattray's pale eyes scanned her steadily.

"I never would have told anyone if it hadn't been for you. You can blame yourself for it all."

"What have I done?" cried Judith.

"You took my place with Victor, and you took Victor—too."

Judith looked at her sharply. Something in the pale eyes made her say quickly:

"Ratty, do you mean . . . Ratty! Do you *love* Victor?"

Miss Rattray laughed bitterly.

"I don't know whether I love him or hate him most. I know that the thought of him has given me no peace for—well, it doesn't matter how many years!"

It seemed to Judith, then, that she couldn't bear another minute of this scene, and that the little room, so overcharged with emotion, was suffocating her.

She turned to the door, saying quickly:

"It's no use, Ratty. . . . Nothing's the least use, it seems to me. It's just wrong and dreadful and wicked to tell David of this and let him brood over it when you know . . . you *know* what he is! It can't do any good and is likely to do the most appalling harm."

Feeling that she was talking wildly, she pulled open the door and went quickly out of the house. When she emerged into the street she drew breath like a half-drowned man coming to the surface, and as she hurried along thoughts went tumbling through her mind. "How dreadful! How dreadful! There's something really terrible about Ratty. She's not human. Or is she too human? Or . . . Oh, heavens! I don't know! I wish I did. I wish I could make head and tail of things and really get to grips with life! What do all these things happen for? Why do people have to feel and rage and hope and despair and love and hate so violently? Why can't life let us all just be at peace? Why is Victor mad to have power

and Ratty to have revenge? If we could all only . . . only . . ."

She drew breath again, unable to put into words the cure for life's restlessness and humanity's twists of soul.

David, Victor's son! She had seen that look in his eyes; that intent, sombre, smouldering look. It was in Ratty's eyes too. David, Victor's son! She remembered how Victor had looked at the boy when they had met in the doorway of Jason's. Had he suspected the truth then? Had he recognized that look and been warned by it? And afterwards, when he had questioned her about David, had he been trying to find out about him? And when he had refused to allow her to see him, had that been something deeper than a mere exertion of his power over her? She didn't know; couldn't guess. There *was* no guessing at the workings of Victor's mind and impulses.

She went home to her mother in a whirl of thoughts and questions; questions for which she could find no answers.

And life, in the big, unrealizable sense of the word, seemed to her more confusing, more terrifying than ever.

Chapter XV

NEXT day, Mrs. Connor was well enough to be sent into the country in charge of a competent nurse, and having made all necessary arrangements for this, Judith went back to Porthverris. She was in a fever of anxiety to have the question of David out with Victor. Exactly what to say she hadn't decided and couldn't decide.

Jason met her at Porthverris station with the car, and greeted her quietly.

"Well, Judy?"

"Well, Victor?"

A quick meeting of eyes and nothing more till they were on their way home.

"Seen Barry?" he asked abruptly.

She turned to him in surprise.

"Isn't he still here?"

"No. Left the day after you left. Said he'd put in a few days at his farm. Made it blatantly obvious that he is here for *you.*"

"Well, you knew that." Judith's tone was quiet. But suddenly she turned to him: "Oh, I see; you thought I'd been seeing him while I was away?"

He gave her a sharp look, then looked straight ahead again.

"No," he said slowly. "I didn't quite think that."

"But it crossed your mind?"

"Yes."

"Are you satisfied that I *haven't* seen him, or must I make some more solemn declaration?" She spoke scornfully.

"I'm satisfied."

"Thank you. When is he coming back?"

"To-morrow. That is the day we both thought *you* would be back. What brought you earlier?"

"Mother was better and able to go down into Sussex with a nurse this morning. There was no need for me to stay longer."

"You didn't *want* to come back, did you?"

"No, I didn't. It's like coming back to some sort of prison. You know that's how I feel."

"I suppose I do. Oh, well . . ." He dropped to silence.

She became aware then of his eyes upon her, and meeting their look was startled at something she saw in them; gone, even as she saw it.

"I came back because I've something to talk over with you; something to tell you."

He steered the car carefully round a sharp corner, saw that the road ahead was clear, and turned to her again.

"Yes?"

"Victor . . ." The smallest hesitation; then, quite simply: "David Rattray is your son."

It sounded to her as if someone else had told him, so utterly different from anything she had expected to say were the words she had spoken.

His face might have been carved in granite for any feeling that it showed. He looked again at the road ahead and didn't speak another word all the way home.

There, he let her go to her room to change, still in silence, and only when she came down again and found him in the living-room did he speak. Then he faced her, standing, and said:

"Who told you?"

It was as if no time had elapsed between her words and this question of his.

"Miss Rattray," she told him.

"I understood that he was her brother's son."

"She has always said that, but it isn't true. She never had a brother. But she had a sister."

Their eyes were meeting and holding steadily.

"You believe this?" he asked.

"It is true. And you know it."

"I know that it is possible. I'm not going to make any pretences about that."

"That day you met David in the doorway of Jason's, you saw the likeness in him then?"

"Did you notice that?"

"It was impossible not to. I didn't understand it. I do now."

"It was like suddenly looking into one's own eyes," he said slowly, and a silence followed. He broke it presently.

"Well, David Rattray is my son. What then?"

"He hates you."

"Has Ratty taught him that?"

"She has never forgiven you."

"I'm not afraid of her hate or of his."

"Your son's," she said stonily.

Again there was silence. Then:

"Are you judging me about this?"

"I can make excuses—even for you, Victor." She

stopped, for an extraordinary expression passed over his face. It was as if his whole face quivered suddenly.

"And you aren't—jealous?" he added after a moment, giving her a queer, quick look.

"Good God! No!" she cried quickly. "There's nothing personal in it to me."

"I've never known it till now. Do you believe that?"

"I'm sure of it. I told Ratty so. I think that the day you met David with me was the first moment you ever had the smallest suspicion."

"The very first."

"The first fear," she added.

He nodded quickly.

"It *was* a fear. You've got sharp eyes, Judy."

"What were you afraid of?"

"Just of the idea. It felt to me that the past rose up and hit me. Uncanny."

"You are not afraid of his hate and resentment?"

He laughed.

"No!" he said roundly.

"Hate horrifies me. Both when I feel it myself and when I see it in others. What are you going to do about David?"

"I'll have to look after him, of course, if he's—my son."

"Will he let you do anything for him?"

"I can try him. There's not much sentiment in this to me, Judy. But if he's my son I do what I can for him. That follows, doesn't it?"

"I'm glad you feel that."

"You do not mind it at all?"

"I have already said that it has absolutely nothing to do with me."

"If you cared for me, it would affect you?"

"I suppose it would, tremendously."

"And it doesn't?"

"Not an atom, from the point of view of you and me."

"I see. Well, I'll deal with this in my own way."

Thinking of it afterwards, Judith reflected how utterly unlike anything she had rehearsed it had been. Not one word that she had planned to say, had she spoken; and nothing that she had expected him to say had he said. She had anticipated something a lot more violent, but Jason had stood up to the thing with a kind of dignified honesty, and the only feeling he had betrayed had been of a kind she had thought impossible in him.

He spent most of next day in his study getting long distance calls on the telephone and having prolonged conversations over it, but Judith knew nothing of what he was speaking about.

Round about five Barry walked in very calmly and took his place in the household as before. The two men met over tea and the queer tension between them was instantly resumed; the atmosphere of watching and waiting; the outward quiet politeness and inward—well, Judith could only guess at what lay beneath the surface.

Immediately after tea, Jason went back to his study and Barry said abruptly to Judith:

"Have you the least idea what has caused the change in him, Judith?" He gave her rather an odd glance.

She thought she very definitely had, but equivocated.

"Have you?"

"Yes."

"Oh, I'd no idea that anyone knew!"

"I've known for some time."

"Did he tell you?"

"Indirectly."

"He hasn't known himself, very long, Jim."

"No; I think I guessed it before he did."

She looked at him, puzzling as to how he had got hold of the story.

"Does it worry you, Judith?" he asked.

"No."

He was silent a moment; then:

"If ever it does, will you tell me?"

Again she was puzzled. This didn't seem to fit somehow. But she always avoided asking Barry questions, in sheer dread of leading to those emotional depths which lay always just concealed beneath the surface of their daily life. So she let it go.

"Yes, I'll tell you, Jim, but there isn't the smallest likelihood of my having to."

"One never knows," he replied briefly.

When she was changing that evening, Jason came from his dressing-room and standing in the open doorway said:

"I got my solicitors to look into Ratty's story, Judy, and it's true."

"Didn't you believe it before?" she asked.

"Yes, but one doesn't just blindly accept such a thing on one's belief." He paused; then added: "It's damn queer!" And laughed shortly.

"What is?"

"The way things work out; fate, or whatever you like to call it. This one blame foolishness of youth has got to get up and hit me this way!"

There was a queer hint of pleading in his voice as if he were asking her to have mercy on him in her thoughts. Victor asking for mercy! The idea was ludicrous. She looked at him steadily.

"There is a law of averages, you know, Victor. You can't expect to be allowed to do all the hitting."

That was all that was said in that strain, but Judith had a feeling that this discovery concerning David had hit him harder and driven deeper than he would ever confess.

His tone was practical and matter of fact when he added:

"I got Denton—my lawyer—to lay certain plans before the boy; I don't know whether he will fall in with them."

"He's an awfully ticklish proposition. Nervy and unsettled," said Judith.

Jason laughed shortly.

"*My* son!" he said, and went back into his room.

That evening after dinner something happened which filled Judith with renewed fears. It was over coffee in the drawing-room. Jason suddenly said, quite pleasantly, but with unmistakable meaning:

"If you feel that your farm seriously needs you, Barry, don't let the cruise interfere at all."

Judith, reading in the light of a tall standard lamp, looked up quickly, as one might look up upon

hearing the sound of that first spatter of rain that heralds a storm.

Barry, quietly smoking, answered from the depths of his chair.

"Thanks, but I put the affairs of my small estate nicely in order when I was there last."

"And it can get along without you?"

"Perfectly. I have a first-class man in charge."

The two men were looking at each other steadily. Judith, glancing from one to the other, found her heart beating fast.

"When the plan was first suggested, you didn't seem particularly keen, I remember," said Jason.

"Sorry if I seemed to treat your invitation ungraciously, Jason, but now, at any rate, I am—particularly keen."

The look between them hadn't wavered. To Judith it was like a tangible line between them; a line of steel.

"In fact," added Barry, "I don't believe that anything could stop me going now."

It was fully half a minute yet before their eyes turned aside. Then Jason said lightly:

"Oh, well, if you feel that way about it . . ." and with a laugh, let it go at that.

A little later Crochett came in and told him that he was wanted on the telephone.

When he went out of the room, Judith shut her book and leaned towards Barry.

"Jim, he doesn't want you to go!"

"I see he doesn't," he replied gravely.

"Then *don't* go. I beg you—*don't* go." She clasped her hands imploringly. "It makes me afraid—that

tone in his voice; that look in his eyes. Jim, something terrible will happen. . . . I know it! Oh, I hate this cruise! I hate the boat! I . . ." She caught a breath and stopped.

He rose and came to her, stooped and took her clasped hands in his and held them firmly for a moment, comfortingly.

"My dear, if he goes and you go, then I go too. That's just as sure as fate. Don't be afraid. Fear is such a killing thing."

For a moment the impulse to go to his arms and cry out all her nightmare fears upon his breast was so great that she never knew where the strength came from not to obey it blindly. Perhaps from Barry himself, whose steadfast eyes looked down straight into hers.

"Suppose he doesn't go at all, Jim? Suppose he simply puts the whole thing off?"

"Then I don't go either."

"You stay here?"

"Yes."

"Watching each other! Waiting for—what? I don't think I can stand much more of it, Jim." Her voice shook badly.

He was silent. Then released her hands and moved away from her.

"There's no question of my leaving you—to him, Judith," he said quietly. "You see, you know so much that I've still got to find out."

"I'm afraid, Jim! Utterly afraid! Of him; of the whole thing. Afraid to have you here; still more afraid to let you go! Afraid of the change that has happened in him lately. It's so quiet; so deadly quiet."

He slewed round and faced her again.

"Afraid of that? *Afraid* of it, Judith?" he cried.

"Yes, utterly afraid. It's unlike him. If he doesn't want you to go why doesn't he prevent it . . . in the old way? Why doesn't he make *me* . . . ask you not to?"

"And if you did, I should still go."

"You don't know what you would be bringing down on me!" she cried.

He shook his head.

"Not now. Don't you realize, Judith, how utterly he is at your mercy now?"

She looked round at him amazed.

"Because of this change in him that we have noticed, Jim?"

"Because of the cause of it."

Still she looked her amazement. The cause of the change in Jason, as far as she knew, was the discovery that David Rattray was his son. Was Jim suggesting that she should *use* her knowledge of that? As a weapon against Jason? That was . . . almost like blackmail. It didn't sound like Jim somehow.

"You needn't be afraid of him any more, Judith," he was saying, breaking into her bewilderment. "Skies above! Can't you see it? Haven't you realized?"

Their eyes met; hers, all confused questioning; revelation in his, which he was on the point of putting into words, when Jason came back into the room.

He gave them a quick look, but only said:

"I hope you're going to be a good sailor, Judy; there's a jolly brisk breeze springing up."

"What time do we go aboard?" asked Barry.

"To-morrow, about three. High tide's at two-fifty."

"When 'e do come rolling in," commented Barry, laughing as he quoted the ancient fisherman.

"I don't believe I shall be a good sailor," said Judith. "I've never had any longing for the sea or for boats!"

"Well, you'll get broken in from the start," said Jason. "We're going across to the Scillys first just to give you a chance to go ashore and have a look at them, Judy, and if you can stand the run from Porthverris Bay to St. Mary's, you'll not have done so badly."

"Suppose I can't?"

"Oh, don't get cold feet."

"And after the Scillys?" asked Barry.

"Channel and Mediterranean."

"Under sail all the time?"

"I don't use my engines except for taking her in and out of harbour. My idea is to use a boat *as* a boat; not as a sea-going motor-car."

"That's all to the good, but it's infernally slow in a calm."

"Anyone who sails with me takes that risk. The slowness of a calm is balanced by the liveliness should there be a storm."

"Oh, I sympathize with the idea; it's my own as well. The fun is all in the sailing. How many men?"

"My old skipper, Trepol, two crew and a wireless man. We take our turn as well, if need be."

"So much the better. A very little lazing goes a very long way, I always find."

"We see eye to eye in quite one or two important

ways," observed Jason dryly, a tone in the words that made Judith look up at him sharply, but there was nothing in his face to tell her anything.

"Are you packed, Barry?" he asked.

"No; I'll carry my case with me."

"Our things went on board to-day."

"How very methodical!"

Jason looked at Barry through a cloud of pipe smoke.

"Yes, it was, rather," he said, and again Judith looked at him. Again, though, his face revealed nothing.

Judith spent most of next morning in setting household affairs in order.

Immediately after an early luncheon, Barry said: "Well, I'll go and throw a few things into a suitcase," and went up to his room.

A moment later Jason came to Judith and told her to get ready as he was going to start. She obeyed, feeling no shadow of suspicion, and they set off together. Instead of making for the harbour, though, Jason led the way to a point that formed one side of the bay and thrust ruggedly out to sea.

"We can get off from here before the tide is full in," he said. "Give me your hand and I'll help you down."

She was halfway down the rough steps that the rocks made when she suddenly asked:

"Why are we doing this, Victor? Why are we coming this way?"

"I want to get to the boat before . . ." He broke off.

"There's only Jim," she observed.

"One of the harbour men will row him out."

"Did you arrange that with him?"

"It was arranged last night. Put your feet just where I tell you, or you'll slip."

At the base of the rocks was a small dinghy, its painter hitched over a boulder on the lee side. Not very far ahead was the *White Crest*, riding at anchor, the sunlight striking shafts of brilliance from her brass-work. In the bay the water hadn't yet touched that point once beyond which it "rolled in" with such disconcerting suddenness, and some of the fishing gigs in the harbour were still high and dry. The tide had yet nearly an hour to make. The rocky point they were clambering down jutted out far enough to be washed by deep water always.

It was when Jason was rowing the little dinghy towards the *White Crest* that Judith said:

"Why need we get on board first, Victor?"

It was a moment before he answered, and when he did, it was without looking at her.

"There's . . . something on board that may surprise you. I want you to see it . . . before . . ."

Judith broke in.

"That's not the real reason. You're lying."

A tinge of colour came into his face, but he only said:

"How do you know that?"

"I suppose because you've never lied to me before and you don't do it well."

He made no answer to that and a moment later pulled alongside the *White Crest*. Judith, troubled and suspicious now, didn't want to go aboard, but old Captain Trepol was there to help her, and before she

could get her feelings of uneasiness sorted out, she was standing on the *White Crest's* gleaming deck, feeling the quick rise and fall of a boat at anchor in a choppy sea.

"Well, how's the *White Crest?*" said Jason, greeting his captain.

"She's handsome," replied Trepol. He was a stocky, weather-beaten Cornishman; blue-eyed, grey-bearded, rough-handed. Always more strongly suggesting the fisherman he had been than the yacht's captain he now was.

"What's the weather going to do?" Jason asked him.

"Your young wireless man says the forecast do stay good."

Trepol looked up at the sky, then away to the horizon on the southwest. Jason laughed.

"You'll back your weather-eye against any weather-expert!"

"I belong to trust it after all the years it's been looking at the sky," answered Trepol seriously.

"Well, what is the forecast?"

"A good, stiff breeze, veerin' to the sou'west."

"What's wrong with that, then?"

"Nawthin'. She'll *veer,* right enough." Again he looked up at the scudding clouds and away to that southwest horizon. "She belong to veer, all right," he repeated.

"Victor, I believe Captain Trepol thinks it's going to be rough. I *know* I shall hate it if it is. I don't much care for the little movement that's going on now," put in Judith.

"It's gawn to be rough," said Trepol positively.

"Do let's not start," said Judith. "Let's go back. I . . . Victor, I *don't* like it." She turned troubled eyes first upon Trepol, then upon Jason.

Jason turned quickly to Trepol.

"You're making Mrs. Jason nervous about nothing. Come below, Judy." He caught her arm and piloted her to the companion-way, turned back, spoke again to Trepol, so low that she couldn't hear what he said, and joined her again.

She followed him down to the cabin feeling troubled; wishing that this cruise had never been thought of. Her dread of it had increased. The boat held no fascination for her; beyond the meticulous orderliness of it, it made no appeal to her; and you can have orderliness anywhere. The characteristic smell which greeted her nostrils at her first breath of the atmosphere below awakened no pleasant thrill. She analyzed it as being a compound of the odours of rope, varnish, engine oil and brass polish, and it seemed to be sickeningly permeating. The movement down here disconcerted her more than it had when she was on deck. And Trepol was suggesting that it was going to be rough!

The cabin was very simply fitted with bunks down either side and a long table between them. Judith sat down on the edge of the nearest bunk and closed her eyes a moment. Then said:

"Oh, well, the surprise. What is it?" Her tone was weary and sceptical.

"It's real enough," he answered with a short laugh; and going out through a doorway at the forward end of the cabin he disappeared into the passage beyond.

What she heard him say then made her slew round towards the door, her eyes wide, a hand clapped over her mouth to check a cry.

"Mrs. Jason is on board. Come and see her, Rattray." Following the words, he was back again, with David behind him.

Judith didn't know what to do or say or think. David here!

"My wireless man, Judy." Jason introduced him.

Judith stammered something conventional about their being old friends.

David was looking a good deal spruced up in his smart, becoming blue. His face was pale, as usual, his eyes dark and bright and eager, but there was an air of set resolution about him that was new.

"Reassure Mrs. Jason about the weather, Rattray," said Jason. "Trepol's been scaring her stiff about it."

"There's no need to be scared, sir," said David, speaking crisply. "The forecast's good. You couldn't expect much better conditions than you've got today." He spoke with an air of authority that sounded odd to Judith, who knew only the lonely-boy side of him.

Jason laughed and turned to Judith.

"There you are, Judy! What did I tell you? Old Trepol's a rule-of-thumb man, bless his honest old heart!"

Judith saw David look at Jason, without moving his head; just turning his eyes. A curious look; veiled and unreadable. How alike they were when the boy lowered his eyelids in that way! She scarcely heard

anything more that was said, and presently Rattray left and she was alone with Jason again.

For a moment she could only look up at him and stare. Then:

"Victor! Why! Why is he here?"

"I had to have a wireless man, Judy."

"Why get *him?*"

"And why not? It's the only job of this sort that I had to offer. It'll give me a chance to discover what he's made of."

"I'm afraid of it. I'm afraid of David; of that terrible, burning resentment in him. Did he come willingly? Was he glad to come when he knew it was *your* boat?" Her words were tumbling out in a quick whisper.

"Oh, yes, willing and eager. A well-paid job so often cools down the hottest resentment," he said ironically.

She rose and moved near him.

"Does he know—about you?"

"He has given no hint that he does."

"Perhaps Ratty didn't tell him after all?"

"Perhaps she didn't. And yet that doesn't sound quite like Ratty, does it?"

"I—I wish you hadn't done it, Victor," she said, after a moment. She thought she knew what a sailor must feel when he finds a bird of ill-omen on board; her feeling about David was no whit less superstitious. There was not room for Victor Jason and David Rattray in the restricted space of one boat. David's air of resolution had not reassured her.

"You don't know him as I do," she said. "If you did you'd be troubled too."

"Well, suppose he *is* a menace to me, you don't care a row of pins what happens to me, do you?"

She made no answer.

"Or—do you?" he added slowly.

"I'm just afraid," she said quickly.

He stretched out a hand and caught her arm.

"Judy."

"Don't touch me, please. Take your hand away."

His hand dropped from her arm. She laughed, unamusedly.

"That's new," she said unsteadily. "For me to give orders and for you to obey them."

"It's rather fun taking orders from you, Judy," he said, a little queerly. "Hadn't it struck you that it might be?"

"Oh, I'm sure you get *something* out of it!" she retorted.

"I'd hoped to please you by doing what I could for Rattray."

"That's new, too, isn't it? Your hoping to please me!"

"Don't sneer; it doesn't suit you." There was a moment's silence, then he added: "He isn't the sort of boy I've ever wanted a son of mine to be."

"No, I imagine not."

"I always pictured any son of mine as a square-shouldered, deep-chested fellow; hard-riding, hard-hitting, and with sun and air and wide spaces right in his very nature! Rattray's stooped, narrow, overgrown. There isn't an element of the savage in him!" He laughed at his own vehemence and Judith flashed a quick look at him.

"That's queer since he is *your* son," she said. "There's a lot of the savage in you."

Since he made no reply, she added: "And I shouldn't be too sure of David either."

"You flatter the boy! He's pasty. I'll do what I can for him, but it will always irritate me to know that he's my son."

Judith had never imagined that they would ever talk of it in this way. She had pictured a big flare-up about it and then strict silence.

"Fine word—son." His voice came through her thoughts, speaking slowly. She looked at him again, quickly. There was a strange, hungry look in his eyes, which she felt she'd seen in some eyes before and yet, for the moment, couldn't think whose; or when. Memory eluded her during the moment their looks held. But when she turned away, she remembered.

David's eyes! The look she had called, to herself, a hungry-dog look! The realization came as such a shock that her heart gave a thump. Jason, with that look in his eyes!

Suddenly he gave a quick glance up at the portholes and next minute was saying:

"Well, here we all are and here we stay; you'll have to make the best of it!"

She realized then that the boat was moving. The scene had been so completely absorbing that she had noticed nothing outside it. Unfamiliar, too, with the typical sounds of boats, she had not recognized the sounds of hoisting sails and weighing anchor.

"We've started!" she cried.

"Nicely under way," he replied. Whatever had

been in the expression of his eyes before, *now* they were unmistakably triumphant.

"But Jim's not here!"

He didn't answer that, and in a flash the truth came to her.

"That was it then! That was the lie you told!" she said breathlessly. "You said you were hurrying on board so that I should see David. And all the time it was to give Jim the slip! Oh, that's mean and dishonest! Go and tell Trepol to turn back! Victor, go and tell him!"

"I'm properly found out!" said Jason with a laugh, and then, abruptly: "Has it ever occurred to you that I might care to have you to myself occasionally, Judy?"

"It was *you* who insisted upon Jim coming down here!"

"That's been the very devil of it. One does these things and then finds them difficult to get out of."

The thought of being alone with Jason on this boat; alone for days, weeks, months perhaps; the thought of David Rattray; the sudden realization of all that Barry's support had meant to her recently made Judith's heart beat wildly. She was panic-stricken. And turning swiftly, she made for the door, saying:

"I shall tell Trepol myself! I won't be here with you! You've got some . . . some fiendish intention in this. . . ."

She went up the companion-way as quickly as she could, he following, calling to her. As she emerged above the deck level, she stopped and cried out:

"Jim!"

That startled Jason and he nearly lifted her the rest of the way.

On the deck stood Barry, beside him Trepol, who seemed to be asking for explanations, which Barry appeared to be patiently giving him. At Judith's cry, he turned and said easily:

"Jolly nearly missed the boat, Jason, and Captain Trepol, curiously enough, doesn't seem to have expected me. It was by the merest luck that I saw you from my window going towards the point, and luck again that I managed to find a man with a motor-boat off the end of the quay."

Judith turned back and faced Jason, her cheeks flaming; eyes indignant. Jason's face was set hard; just his lips were working slightly.

Barry went on in the same easy way.

"I know that my scramble on board was unorthodox and lacking in dignity, but then the boat was already under way. I couldn't stop to do it in style. But you might just tell Captain Trepol that I am an authorized guest and that the fact of his not knowing that was simply due to your having neglected to tell him."

Barry had been too sharp for him and Jason recognized it. He laughed shortly.

"All right, Barry. Sorry I made a mess of things," he said briefly, and explained matters to Captain Trepol.

Chapter XVI

If Judith was not a good sailor, at least she was not a hopelessly bad one.

Half an hour of a strong but capricious breeze and a fidgety rather than a very rough sea drove her below, and for a time she lay in her berth, feeling fit for nothing.

Jason was surprisingly thoughtful and kind; she had imagined that he would be impatient and angry with her for being sea-sick. Instead he showed himself tactful and concerned; brought her brandy and dry biscuits, and with a queer new humility touched her forehead with gentle fingers.

After a while she dropped into a most refreshing sleep. Thereby missing, not only a very remarkable panorama view of the Cornish coast, but also the expression upon Jason's face as he sat beside her, looking at her with sombre eyes, and heaven alone knew what thoughts in his brain. He left her, presently, to sleep her sleep out, undisturbed.

Much later, when she awoke, she suffered a moment or two of utter confusion as to her surroundings, sprang up quickly, and was at the door of her cabin before she was thoroughly awake. When she pulled open the door, she found herself face to face with David Rattray. She fell back a step, passing a hand over her forehead.

"I couldn't think where I was," she said with a faint laugh.

"I've been waiting to see you." He kept his voice very low.

"The boat seems much steadier," she said hurriedly, disturbed by his manner. His crisp authoritativeness had vanished; he was again the awkward, intense boy she knew.

"Yes, the wind's dropped a lot."

"Then Trepol was wrong. I am glad. I don't want it to be rough. I dread it being rough, David." She smiled at him, but he made no response. Only leaned towards her, saying:

"Judith, I'm here to serve you. Not him. Remember that I'm here to serve *you*. As I've always said I would."

This intensely personal purpose behind his presence on the *White Crest* was exactly what she had been fearing. He was here, driven by his emotion for her; to be near her; to be able to see her; speak to her. It was just as she had suspected.

"Do your job well, David, and . . . and keep the peace. That will be serving me best of all," she said in a low voice.

"I know my job all right," he answered quickly, and leaning down he caught her hand suddenly, wrung it so strongly that she nearly cried out; then turned away and left her abruptly, shutting her door behind him.

"Victor was mad to bring him here!" she thought.

When she had washed and tidied her hair she felt better. The boat seemed to be much steadier now,

and the atmosphere of the cabin was hot and close. Sea-legs were unknown to her yet, but it certainly was not half so difficult to move about as it had been.

Looking at her watch, she found to her amazement that it was nearly seven. She'd had no idea that she had slept so long. She put on a coat and made her way up to the deck.

As soon as she appeared, Jason came to her, found her a chair, and sat down beside her.

"Better?" he asked.

She nodded. "Much! It's so much smoother than it was."

"The damn breeze has dropped away to nothing," he grumbled, glancing up at the sails.

She looked around her. It was an odd feeling to be out of sight of land, with nothing but sea and sky as far as she could see. All the choppiness had gone from the water now; it seemed to heave and roll beneath an unbroken surface. There was a curious look upon the whole face of it, as if a thin, subtle veil had been pulled over it. The sky was beginning to look sullen; with the dropping of the wind the clouds were hanging together, scarcely moving. Such patches of evening blue as showed were hazy, and away on the horizon there was a yellow tinge that blurred the line between sky and sea.

Barry was standing forward, smoking; he had greeted Judith from where he stood, but now he came towards her, asking how she was. He remained beside her. They talked very little. Judith wondered if anything had happened between the two men while she had been sleeping. Had there been any sort of quarrel about Jason's trick upon Barry? Their faces

revealed nothing. Trepol was at the wheel, his wise eyes raised to the sails, a stocky, dependable-looking figure.

A great quietness seemed to be settling upon them. It was almost ghostly, the way the boat gently rose and fell, with scarcely the sound of a ripple. When Jason called to Trepol: "Where's the wind gone to?" Judith started, his voice had seemed so loud.

"Back o' they clouds," answered Trepol, jerking a thumb toward a low-lying bank of grey that was gradually emerging through the yellow tinge over the sky-line.

"Sou'west. Well, that's according to schedule."

"Schedule or not, that's where she is."

"Don't grouse, we could do with a breath more."

"We'll get it," said Trepol laconically.

The light was fading now; it was as if the grey veil was rising from the water, gently blotting the colour out of everything. The stillness became deeper than ever; the silence more profound. Judith had a feeling of being almost anæsthetized by it. Jason still sat upon the deck at her side, his knees up and his hands clasped round them; Barry still stood at the other side of her chair, smoking and gazing into the enveloping dusk. She didn't look at either of them, but was tremendously conscious that they were there. She didn't know how time went; in this peculiar, detached stillness there seemed to be no measure of anything; one swell of the sea was so just like the next, it might have been the same movement rising, falling and rising again; there seemed to be nothing by which to prove that the *White Crest* had made progress. Darkness deepened so subtly

round them that minutes might have been hours and hours minutes.

Jason moved to get a rug and put it round her. She thanked him in a whisper and dropped to silence again.

Trepol gave the wheel to one of the crew and came to Jason, asking to speak to him. Jason rose, and they went forward and stood, two silhouetted figures, looking unreal in the dimness. Judith looked after them and, without raising her eyes, knew that Barry had turned and was watching them too. They spoke so low that only the murmur of their voices reached Judith. She couldn't hear what was said between them. They came back again, Jason saying: "Trepol's prophesying storm now. I'm going to see Rattray."

"There's storm behind they clouds, brother." Trepol's voice, dropping from sheer force of conviction into his homely vernacular, followed.

Jason disappeared below. Judith looked at Barry.

"Do you think there's going to be a storm, Jim?"

"Well, there's the feel of it in the air and a queer swing in the sea, but it may not be anything much. We'll see what Rattray says."

When Jason came back he was laughing.

"Yes, there's a storm on the programme, but it isn't going to amount to anything. Hear that, Trepol?"

"I hear," answered Trepol, unconvinced.

"He was suggesting starting up the engines and running for home," went on Jason, still laughingly.

"You've got Mrs. Jason on board and she don't like it rough," Trepol said, stolidly noncommittal.

"Well, I don't want to hear a peep out of the engines on this trip."

Jason remained standing beside Judith now.

"Rattray seems pretty smart at his job," he said, stooping and lowering his voice for Judith alone.

"I'm glad." Her voice was low, too.

After that, silence again, while the last of the daylight faded lingeringly from the sky, and the breeze slacked away to nothing. The stillness was oppressive now; the listless flapping of the sails seemed only to accentuate it. In all that dim space around them there seemed nothing left to breathe. Judith felt as if she were merging with it, becoming part of it. She, and the two motionless figures, one on either side of her.

She sat straight suddenly, drawing a breath as if the closeness were stifling.

Instantly the two men were leaning down to her, Jason catching her hand, Barry with his hand outstretched, but checking the impulse halfway. Again there was breathless stillness. Then they raised their heads, looking into each other's faces.

It was as if a moment of time had been caught up and held in suspension.

Judith felt that she must cry out aloud; smash up the moment and the stillness and the silence.

Away on the sullen skyline a light flickered and forked.

"Storm," said Barry with a quick lift of the head. And:

"Storm," echoed Jason, but his eyes hadn't moved from Barry's face.

Judith stretched out her hands at each side as if to press the two men apart.

"I—I hope it's not going to be rough," she said, and the moment seemed to break up and pass along.

Jason straightened up; Barry moved a pace away.

"I don't think it's going to touch us," said Jason, and his voice was matter of fact again.

At the time, it seemed as if this were going to be true. They remained on deck watching the flicker and branching of lightning over the horizon and listening to the distant rumble of thunder. The lightning showed up a far-away sky that was grand with a low moving pageant of clouds and a sea heaving beneath a surface, polished as oiled steel.

"You aren't afraid of it, Judy?" asked Jason suddenly.

"I don't think I am," she answered slowly. "It seems stupid, somehow, to be afraid of something that can't be helped; of a power that can't be touched."

"It's a wonderful manifestation of that," he answered quickly. "Power that can't be touched. Blind and impartial power." A curious exultation had come into his voice, and in the almost dark she saw that his hands were clenched and that his face was strange.

"Fatalistic." The single word came from Barry.

Jason swung round to him.

"You feel it too? *You* feel it?" he cried, and there was an odd excitement suddenly to his tone.

"Power to do good," put in Judith, troubled and uneasy.

Jason twisted back towards her.

"No, just power," he said curtly. "Just to feel it

within you; to know you've got it. To know that you can strike and crush!"

"Oh!" she said faintly, but Barry's hand reached down and was suddenly round hers, warning her to keep silent. The words she would have spoken died on her lips.

"See that?" Jason pointed to the distant skyline where jagged shafts of light were splitting the darkness of the clouds. "Just to reach down like that and know that one touch can rive the stoutest oak, fire the most gallant ship, twist and char and make horrible the most godlike among men!" He laughed aloud, tilting back his head. "And when you've struck, just to sit back and know that you can do it again, when the mood takes you, and that nothing can stop you! Nothing can stop you!" He repeated that with another swift turn to Judith.

"That it still works!" she cried out sharply, quoting him out of a memory charged with humiliations.

This time Barry did nothing to silence her. Her voice left profound quiet after it. The tension was high. Barry felt it acutely. His watching eyes were probing the darkness.

"Yes, that it still works." Jason's voice, heavy, dull, all exultation gone abruptly from it. He moved away without another word.

Barry drew a breath, stretched down his hand and again clasped Judith's.

"I understand now," he said in an almost soundless voice.

Her fingers clung to his.

"Jim, do you think he's——" The words trailed

"Mad?" he finished for her. "No; kinked—yes.

Skies above! when I think of you I could——" And his words trailed too. He suddenly wrung her hand as if in agony at having to let it go, and dropped his to his side again.

"I . . . I can't stand this any more," she said gaspingly, and rose quickly and went below.

Her cabin was in darkness, but she put on the light, threw off her coat and sat down on the edge of her berth, moving gently forward and back with the roll and swing of the boat, her hands clasped tight up beneath her chin, trying to think, trying to be calm.

Victor and his lust for power. Just a queer kink, Jim said, and yet . . . Her thoughts went to pictures and memories. . . .

The abrupt opening of the cabin door made her start round. Jason came in, shut the door and crossed to her slowly. He stood quite still, looking down at her, the light from the swinging bracket-lamp touching him one-sidedly.

"Victor," she cried, catching a quick breath. "What is it? What do you want?"

Without moving he answered:

"I want your love, Judy!"

She looked up at him, flushed, her eyes wide and dark, full of amazed questioning.

"W-what?" she stammered uncertainly, scarcely believing that she had heard correctly.

"I want your love," he repeated. "Your love, Judy. All of it, heart and mind and soul!" He broke off.

"I can't give it to you," she answered simply.

He came to her, caught her hands and leaned down to her.

"I love you, Judy. Wholly; terribly. You must love me!"

She tried to free her hands and failed.

"But I don't, Victor. Can't; and never, never could."

"It's the only thing in all the world that I want."

"And it isn't in my power to give it to you."

"I'll do anything you ask of me. Give you everything you want." His voice was low and pleading and the hungry look was in his eyes.

She met it stonily and shook her head.

"You've got all that you can ever have of me!" she answered, her voice hard.

"But I've got nothing of you if you don't love me!" There was anguish in his voice now, but she had suffered too much at his hands to heed it.

"Just discovered that, have you?" she asked bitterly.

"You've eaten your way into the very core of my heart, Judy. I'm . . . lost without you. I simply don't live if you aren't with me."

"And I haven't lived since I've been with you!"

"That isn't true! Say it isn't true! Take it back! You don't hate me as much as that!" His hands slid to her arms now, and he was shaking her in his vehemence.

"I hate you enough, Victor. Don't ask me to measure it; dissect it. Hate is a killing thing."

"Then love me instead, Judy! I'll be so good to you. Make you so happy. . . . Live for you. Be ruled by you. . . . Judy, love me." His hands were bruising her arms, and he dropped on his knees beside her.

In the queer, detached way that outside thoughts will cross the mind, even in the most difficult and tense moments, it came to Judith that here was her moment of revenge; here, her moment of triumph. But looking down into his face, dark with passion and tragic with fear, she saw only the whole hopeless stupidity of the thing; the uselessness of it. A thing which had hurt her beyond all measure, and which hadn't even fulfilled his purposes or desires. And she could feel neither revenge nor triumph; only an aching despair.

"It's no good asking me for love, Victor, because it isn't in my power to give it. I can't love you if I don't. That's reasonable surely?" She uttered a tired little laugh.

"No, it isn't! Because you haven't tried to love me. You haven't thought of it. You've been so set on hating me. . . ." He was pleading fiercely, his face close to hers, his breath hot on her cheek.

She tried to push him from her, but against his strength hers frittered away to nothing.

"Even if I had never hated you, I couldn't love you, Victor. It's useless to argue with me about it. Love isn't a matter of arguing. It exists or it doesn't; it is or it isn't."

"I don't believe that, Judy. I won't believe it. If you would try to forget all that has been and start again, I'd make you love me. I'd be so good to you that you couldn't help it! Try, Judy; Judy, darling, try."

"In all my lifetime I couldn't forget what has been, Victor, but that isn't at all the point. Even if it never *had* been, I shouldn't love you. Even if you had never

trapped and tortured me; humiliated me; laid me open to taunts and sneers. Even if you had never brought upon me the degradation of an utterly loveless marriage. . . . Oh, Victor, what's the good of talking! Even if none of the hell of this last year had happened, I couldn't love you. Just believe that please, and go."

He only held her closer and pleaded the more hotly. He had always got what he wanted, and this, the greatest thing he had ever wanted, and the thing he wanted more than all the rest of life added together, was being withheld. That didn't seem possible to him.

"Judy, have I made life such a hell for you? *Have* I hurt you so badly? Been so cruel? Honestly I've never meant to! Honestly, Judy!"

She looked at him, then, with interest in her eyes. And, utterly amazed, saw that he spoke the truth.

"I didn't know that you minded so much," he added.

"For over a year now I have been in your power," she said slowly. "For over a year you have held my life in your hands, and twisted and crushed it as you would. You have forced me to do things that were hateful, degrading, humiliating. Just for the selfish pleasure of exercising your power! And you say that you haven't known what it meant to me! Do you expect me to believe that?"

"It is true! I swear it. Power isn't a . . . a personal thing, Judy. It's just a . . . well, an appetite that has got to be satisfied. Haven't you understood? Can't you understand now?"

"No. I'm sorry, Victor. Perhaps I've been too

close to it to analyze it. I once told you that the kindest thing to think was that your lust for power was a madness. I still can't think anything kinder about it than that."

"But it is you who hold it now. You who have all the power, Judy. I am so utterly yours that you can do as you like with me! Won't that satisfy you? Isn't it something to you that I love you as I've never loved anything in the world before? *You* have the power now."

She looked at him with sombre eyes.

"I don't want it, Victor. It means nothing at all to me. I'm not made that way. I can't even feel any elation that you are not having things all your own way; that you are suffering. I can see that you are, but it leaves me cold."

"I am suffering, Judy, and have been for weeks past. I've tried to show you by . . ."

"By being more obliging?" she broke in. "I've noticed it and wondered."

"Wondered what, darling?"

She uttered another miserable little travesty of a laugh.

"What your game was," she said.

"My game?"

"I suspected even your good moods; felt that there must be a catch in them somehow. That has been your fault, you know."

"I realize it. But am I never to be forgiven? What have I done that you need be revengeful?"

She laughed again and stopped him.

"I believe you really don't see it," she said. "If that is so, nothing I can say will ever make you.

Please let me go, Victor. You're hurting my arms badly."

"And you're hurting my heart," he continued in a low voice. "You're hurting my soul. Driving me to . . . desperation . . ." His voice shook away to silence. Then: "Is it David Rattray that makes you refuse me?"

"No."

"You still have no feeling about that?"

"None at all."

Her utter coldness maddened him. She was immovable as a rock against which all his pleading simply dashed itself to silly fragments and was rendered meaningless.

"If I ever have felt the least inclined to admire you," she added, "it was for the way you took the revelation about David. But it didn't amount quite to admiration even then."

"I tried to please you over that," he pleaded eagerly.

"I realize that you did. But you can't please me, Victor. If your power was great enough to wipe out the past year and restore to me all that it might have meant to me, then I might be . . . *pleased!* But your power is so silly and small a thing that it cannot work the really worth-while miracles. I told you once that your power was silly and small, didn't I? Aren't you beginning to think so?"

He released her suddenly and stumbled up to his feet, and in a queer, blind sort of way blundered across the cabin. Back and forth a time or two without speaking. Then he stopped before her again.

"It may be silly and small," he said slowly, and

the words seemed to drop weightily, "but since you refuse to take it into your own hands, I may remind you that it is still in mine."

Judith's heart gave a thump, but she forced herself to look straight at him without cringing.

"I know that," she said steadily.

"I shall use it."

She didn't speak.

"If you don't love me."

"That is childish!" she cried sharply.

"Small and silly, no doubt, but forceful."

"Simply childish! I can *pretend* to love you, but no power on earth can *make* me love you!"

"I *tell* you to love me!" He stood before her, big and dark; his eyes on fire, his lips working.

She was afraid of him suddenly and rose to face him. What if he were really mad? What if the kink in his brain that Barry had spoken of had gone to madness point?

"If I wanted to I could not," she answered.

"Then you know what will happen?"

"It must happen, that is all."

This must be madness! No sane brain could think that such a threat could touch the question even lightly. He came to her quickly, caught her in his arms and kissed her wildly. Kissed her lips and her throat and her hair; kissed the hands she used in her endeavour to fight him off. And brokenly his voice was pleading for the love she had no smallest power to give. When in desperation at her persistent stand against him he thrust her from him and moved away, she stood with hands clenched at her sides, her face

dead white and her eyes blazing. She was breathing quickly and trembling from head to foot.

"Don't ever do that again," she said in a low voice. "Don't ever touch me again. Don't ever come near me. You cannot frighten me. Your power cannot frighten me. For my power is greater now than yours." She stopped and drew a breath. "You ask for something that you *know* I cannot give. Your power may control everything that I do, but it cannot control one single thing that I feel. And you know it, and so your threats are just so many words and nothing more. You have gloried in your power; blindly imagining it as something wonderful. Well, you know now just how wonderful it is! And I believe it doesn't even seem so very wonderful to you after all. But use it if you want to and how much of your real desire will you have achieved? You want my love, and no power can give it to you; no matter what you do, you will not get that."

He turned to her with a curious cry of pain.

"You love Barry!" He said it half as a question, half as an assertion.

"Yes," she answered quietly.

"His face was terrible as he cried out:

"Barry! You love Barry! I knew it! By heaven! I'll smash him!" He swung round to leave the cabin and she reached out a hand to stop him, when the door opened and Barry came in saying quietly:

"I'm here, Jason, and quite at your service."

Jason swung round and faced Barry. He gave an impression of being aflame from head to foot with sweeping, primitive fury. The fury of jealousy.

"By heaven, I'll smash you!" he said again in a low voice that was like the snarl of an animal. He lunged forward madly, hitting out wildly with his fists. Barry stepped aside and the lunge spent itself in a futile, uncontrollable rush that nearly took Jason through the open doorway. He turned again, his head low, eyes ablaze, hands closed threateningly.

"Jason," said Barry quietly, "Judith's here, you know."

"Keep her name off your lips!" said Jason savagely.

"If you like. At least let's spare her all we can."

"She loves you, do you hear?"

"I've known that for some time. Just as you have known that I love her," replied Barry. He was standing very straight and looked immensely tall in the little cabin. His hands were fists too, but he was keeping them close against his sides. His face was hard and set, his voice steady, eyes like steel. "Just as you have known that I love her," he repeated very clearly.

Jason took a step towards him.

"What is she to you?" he asked hoarsely.

Their eyes met.

"The woman I love as a man *can* love only once."

"That all?"

"If you do not know me better than to ask that, Jason, you should by this time know *her.*" Barry's voice broke off short as if he swallowed down an anger that nearly mastered him.

"Though heaven knows she owes you very little loyalty!" he added, and the words were shaken now.

"Jim! . . . Victor . . . Please, please . . . I

beg you. . . ." Judith started forward, imploring.

Barry put out a hand and pushed her back.

"It's come, Judith, that moment we've all been waiting for. No good trying to stop it. No good to shirk," he said quietly.

"Yes, it's come all right!" cried Jason.

"I'm ready. Don't shout, and don't think that for a single second you can make me afraid, because you can't. That being quite clear, let it rip."

Jason obeyed and for a bad quarter of an hour it did rip. He was furious and baffled and maddened by jealousy and by the balking of his desires. In his madness he flung accusations which Judith burned to hear. But Barry, realizing the frenzy of the man, took them coolly, met them squarely, answered them clearly. Until Jason's strength was worn down and his vituperations weakened, and he leaned back against the frame of the door as if his physical strength were gone too.

Then Barry took command.

"I'm glad it's come, Jason," he said in a quiet moment. "Even glad that you have said all the things you have said, because Judith and I both know them to be untrue, and nothing else matters to us. We've been together for weeks now, you and I, watching each other like a couple of tigers, ready all the time for the chance to spring. Well, you've sprung. Sprung wildly and missed your mark. You can't hurt me and I won't let you hurt Judith even if you want to. You've played a low, rotten game, Jason, and you've lost!"

Jason's looks travelled past Barry and rested upon Judith.

"So you told," he accused her.

"No," said Barry quickly. "But I have eyes and I love her and it has not been hard to see enough of the truth to know where the diabolical blame rests! Your craze for power. That's where the blame rests, Jason. Blame for the misery you have brought upon her, blame for the agony you have brought upon yourself."

Jason uttered a sound that was like something not altogether human, suffering such agony as could not very easily be realized.

"Even now," Barry went on, "I do not know all the details. But I know this: that in some manner you got her life, her young, plucky life, into your infernal hands, and you crushed it, just for the inhuman joy of showing yourself that you could; that you had the power. That something was so utterly in that power of yours as to be unable even to struggle against it. You made her marry you, not because you loved her—you didn't until recently—but just because it was a demonstration of your power. You made her come and meet me in the tea-garden as your wife, just for the pleasure of knowing that your power had foiled and hurt us. You saw that I cared, and made her humiliate herself to come to me and ask me here, just so that you could play with her unhappiness and mine. You threw us together in every way you knew, simply to torture us with each other; just to show yourself that it was in your power to use two human beings in this way. And then . . ." Barry paused and drew a breath.

Jason leaned back against the door frame still and stricken. The moment was here and it had gone

against him. His power had builded high and was crumbling down to dust before him. Barry was putting it into words.

"And then your power turned and hit you. Hit blindly, impartially, fatally. You discovered that you, too, loved Judith. I saw it, Jason, could almost hit upon the very moment that it happened. And from that moment the power has been, not yours, but hers."

Jason's head was sunk low upon his breast. His defeat was more abject than that of a beaten hero in the prize-ring, because it was a defeat of the very soul of him.

"You caught her; trapped her; tried to break her; hurt her in every way you could. . . ."

Jason suddenly raised his head.

"I didn't want to hurt her!" he cried, and there was something wretchedly unhappy in his voice.

"No, you just wanted to prove your power! The power to reach down and strike; and to sit back, knowing that you can do it again, whenever you like! But such power doesn't belong to men; they don't know how to use it. Such power belongs only to God. '*Thine* is the kingdom, the power and the glory.' " Barry's voice was low and ringing, and when he broke off, the silence seemed to hold his words hanging in the air.

Suddenly the silence was rent by a clap of thunder that seemed to split right overhead.

The throbbing of the engine started; the boat developed a roll which threw them off their balance for a moment, then righted again and forged ahead at full speed.

The atmosphere in the cabin was entirely changed in these few seconds. Jason straightened up.

"We've gone about!" he cried, and left the cabin quickly, Barry following at his heels, saying:

"The storm's caught us."

Once on deck it was obvious that this summed up the situation. The night was inky black around them, save when vivid lightning showed up the smoky clouds, trailing down towards the sea in wicked-looking points. The sea was breaking into flecks of white; thunder roared and rumbled and roared again.

"What are you doing?" called out Jason to Trepol, lifting his voice above the general commotion.

"What we belong to have done two hours ago, m'dear," answered Trepol. "I'm headin' for home. I knawed there was a gale behind them clouds if the weather report didn't." Trepol, the fisherman, had taken charge. "*Weather* report!" he added in a growl which expressed a wealth of scorn.

That seemed to give Jason an idea, for he raised his head quickly, stood for a moment quite still, then made his way to the wireless room. On his way he saw Judith coming up the companion-way and spoke to her roughly.

"Go below and stay there!"

She obeyed without question, awed by the aspect of the night, and he went on.

In the wireless room he found David, standing by his chair, his head-phones in his hand. His head was raised as if he were listening intently, and there was a queer, bright intentness in his eyes.

When Jason came in he slewed round, and across

the little room their eyes met and held. Then David laughed an odd, rather terrible laugh of triumph. The thought went ripping through Jason's head: "He knows. Ratty did tell him. . . ." Then he spoke: "There's a storm coming after us with a fifty-mile gale behind it," he said abruptly. He took a step forward. "And you knew it," he added. "Playing about with the reports, eh? Driving us into this hell on purpose?"

David leaned forward, speaking into Jason's face.

"Not such a darned hell as you drove her into! Not such a hell as you drove my mother into! Yes, I've driven you into this hell all right! *And* on purpose. *And* I fooled with the reports. . . . You've got it all quite straight and clear!"

Jason looked at him a moment. Then: "You're mad," he said abruptly.

David laughed abruptly.

"The mad son of a mad father, perhaps!"

"You damned young fool! Do you think that if you put the boat in peril you can keep *her* safe. If the boat goes, we all go with it. You, she, every man Jack of us!"

The glint in David's eyes was unpleasant to see.

"She'll be free of you! That's all I care! I can't get her for myself. Never had any hope of it. But I'll get her free of you!"

"So you love her too, do you?"

"I worship her. She's the loveliest thing in all the world! The whitest and sweetest and best!"

The awkward inarticulateness of years was broken through, and all the unspoken feeling of his intense

young heart and unbalanced mind was forming for the first time into words.

"You can't do to her what you have done and get away with it. You can't treat a girl as you treated my mother and go scot free. Those are two women I've got down on my score against you. And there's a third. A woman who shouldered your responsibilities for you—worked for you to keep *me*. Gave you the best of seventeen years and was thrown out at the end as if she were of no account. That's three women down on my score against you. On my score alone!"

"Your score is all that need concern you," put in Jason grimly, but David was scarcely listening.

"I heard your row with that fellow Barry. D'you think he isn't keeping a reckoning against you? D'you think that if I were to let you off, *he* would? My God! The hate you create around you ought to burn you up!"

"I'm roasting in fires of my own making. I don't need you to stoke 'em!"

The boat gave a sudden terrific lurch, which sent David to the wall and Jason on top of him. Everything in the little room that wasn't fixed slid along the floor and rattled from the table.

"It's hit us!" shouted Jason, picking himself up and dragging David to his feet with him. "Get back to your job, you young fool, and do it this time, straight as a string or . . ."

A crashing burst of thunder drowned his voice and the lurch of the boat sent them down again. When finally he gathered himself and went staggering up to the deck, he realized that the full fury of the storm

was upon them. The boat was running before the wind, with engines at full speed ahead; normal sails lowered and storm canvas set. The lightning showed mountainous waves that broke over the *White Crest's* stern. One moment she slid into a trough that seemed as if it must swallow her whole; the next, her bow appeared to pierce the very clouds. Portholes, of course, were closed; hatches battened down; she was shipping green seas and her decks were awash. The wind was shrieking through the rigging; thunder going big guns overhead; lightning splitting the darkness only to make it seem darker still.

Jason stood clinging to anything that presented itself, gasping for breath in a wind that seemed to snatch the breath out of his very lungs; the bubble of foam was ankle deep around his feet and he could scarcely stand for the slipperiness of the decks. He had to fight his way to Trepol at the wheel, and when there had to shout to make the captain hear what he said. Trepol was reassuring. He'd weathered worse storms than this, in frailer craft, and didn't look for anything more than an exciting hour or so. Struggling his way down again, Jason bumped into Barry. A streak of blue light made them clear to each other. Barry was in oilskins, and thrust out an oilskin coat to Jason.

"I was trying to find you. Here, shove it on. You'll be soaked," he said.

Jason got into the coat without a word. Then:

"Our moment came with a bang," he said, and the words sounded grim even though his voice was raised.

"We hang together through this, Jason. You can

count on me. Whom do I take my orders from? You or Trepol?"

"Trepol. We'll do our settling up later . . . if it isn't all settled up for us."

"No danger of that, I should think, unless something happens. She's a good stiff boat."

"I'm going down to see Judy!"

During the unrecordable streak of time of another lightning flash they looked into each other's eyes. Then out of darkness again Barry's voice said:

"Don't let her be afraid!"

"Of me or the storm?"

"Of either."

In the cabin Jason found Judith sitting on the edge of her berth, holding to the corner post. Everything shiftable had been shifted by the violent pitching of the boat, and a medley of things were scattered on the floor.

He came to her, unevenly as a drunken man.

"My son has been faking the weather forecasts," he said abruptly. "Taking it down as good when it wasn't. Running us into all this on purpose." He caught the edge of the upper berth and, with a lunge of the boat, swung towards her rather fantastically. But only the import of what he said mattered.

"Victor! Oh, I knew something was wrong! This is my fault!" cried out Judith.

"No. Mine. Ratty has told him the truth, and his hatred of me has gone to madness."

"I begged . . . implored Ratty not to tell him! What's his reason for this? Where's the idea in it?"

"To set you free of me!"

"Let me go and speak to him. . . ." She started

up and was nearly thrown down by a plunging movement, when he caught her arm.

"The damage is done. We're in the storm. Trepol is making port as fast as he can. Queer the number of men you've managed to make crazy for you, Judy!"

"But this is terrible of David! Wicked; senseless . . ."

"The boy's as mad as a hatter. The mad son of a mad father he calls himself. You've said that too, Judy!"

The roar of thunder drowned the sound of his voice and she didn't hear his last words.

"What a storm!" she cried. "And he drove us into it!"

"Barry says you are not to be afraid."

She turned big dark eyes up to him. "I'm not . . . very . . ."

"Most women would be."

"Perhaps I shall be later on, if it gets worse. I can't be now, even for the sake of being like most women."

There was a sort of bitter humour in that that made him smile.

"I love you like hell, Judy," he broke out.

"I'm not even afraid of that!"

"That's worse than the storm, eh?"

"Much."

It was a queer scene; Judith, clinging to the post beside her berth, and Jason holding with all his strength to the berth above. But there was nothing queer in it to either of them then.

Suddenly he said a thing that she had never expected to hear from him.

"If ever I've hurt you as badly as you've hurt me, may God forgive me!"

That suddenly touched her so deeply that she nearly broke down. As a drowning man is said to see his whole life unroll before him, so she suddenly seemed to re-live her life with Jason from the first moment of their meeting until now. It was as if no single detail of the torture he had put her through escaped her; but now she saw him, not as a monster of cruelty inflicting pain for the sheer lust of it; not as a great strength crushing weaker things for the hateful pleasure it gave, but as a poor, weak, small thing; a poor, weak, driven thing at the mercy of that terrible urge for power that was greater than himself. And the sum total of it for him was in that heartfelt cry of his, uttered with an almost childish simplicity: "May God forgive me." Power! He had called it Power!

The futility of it. The pity of it.

"I've never thought that there could be forgiveness for you, Victor, but . . ." She caught a breath and her voice was suddenly full of tears. "But I believe there . . . may be . . . if . . . if you want it . . . as . . . as badly as all that."

She did not hold out her hand or offer him one single touch, but it was as if her spirit came towards him, shining with sweet kindness. Whatever of the sublime there was in him stood before it, awed and dazzled as by a great light.

It was only a moment, for the crashing of the thunder broke again and the violence of the sea

tossed the boat like a cockleshell upon its surface, but it was a moment that held eternities for him. He tried to speak and couldn't utter a sound; his dark, granite-hard face worked like a tearful child's. He turned and made his way, reeling and lurching, out of the cabin.

Just outside the door he was met by Barry. Barry with his face white and his eyes wide and the salt water running from his oily.

"We're for it, Jason," he said quickly. "Steering gear's gone west!"

They both knew what that meant and stood looking at each other with the knowledge stark naked in their eyes.

Judith's voice sounded suddenly from the doorway.

"I heard," she cried. "What does it mean? What can we do?"

"Pray to God," said Jason. "Go back to your room, Judy; I'll come to you, when . . ."

But a lurch of the boat threw her forward into his arms. He caught her strongly, one hand gripping her, the other clinging to the door frame; above them sounded the roar and wash of water dashing over the decks.

She gave an odd little gasp.

"We're all in it now," she said. "All at the mercy of power! That's queer, isn't it?" An hysterical laugh broke from her.

Chapter XVII

THE *White Crest* was now utterly at the mercy of the storm; driven by a wind that was destined to be famous in the records for storms and which was responsible for strewing much wreckage upon the face of the waters. Shrieking behind her, the wind drove her before it.

How long this mad fury lasted, Judith was never able to reckon. She remained in her cabin, crouched on the floor, her arms linked around the post that ran up from the corner of the lower berth, clinging with all her strength to keep from being hurled this way and that by the crazy tossing of the driven boat. Pale and wide-eyed, if she was afraid, she was not really acutely conscious of being so. Her chief feeling was one of tremendous tenseness; a queer mounting excitement, through which thoughts cut their scattered way.

Power! It was all around them; harrying them; lashing them; urging them to its will and against their own! Suppose it should beat them at the finish? What exactly would that mean? Thoughts flashed through her mind and merged and were lost in the never-ceasing noises of the storm. At the back of the upheaval she seemed to see the fanatic figure of David, who had driven them, knowingly, into it. . . . The appalling wickedness of it! Indeed, Victor's past had arisen and struck him! Through her, too; for if

David had not conceived his queer, driving passion for her, his revengefulness would never have gone to these terrible lengths. It was to set her free that he had done it. To set her free? How? By death! Death at the hands of this frenzy of storm that was smashing and crashing around them? That one unbalanced boy could plan to work so much destruction! Yet he had said that he was here to serve her. . . . In his twisted way he saw himself as a heroic figure doing a great and noble thing. That they should be here in all this wild, lashing fury simply because of the distorted images in this boy's mind! Something curiously out of proportion in that; and yet it seemed to be the way things always worked. It never seemed to be the big things one did or the fine-sounding things one said that led to important results. It was the little things; the insignificant words, the things one did and thought no more about; the words one spoke and forgot. . . . Those were the things that went piling up and up until they touched a total that overwhelmed and destroyed.

An especially turbulent outburst of noise seemed to batter all thoughts from her brain, and left her, recovering, with a deafening singing in her ears. . . . And it had been for David to ordain that she should be here!

No, it went further back than that; to Ratty. Ratty with her light eyes and thin lips. . . . Ratty, faded, work-worn and cast-out. Fantastically—but then, the moment was not normal—she saw Ratty as the fury of the storm; as if the shrieking sound and blinding light all burst forth from the blazing passion of Ratty's hate-filled heart; from the white-

hot furnace of her emotion-ridden soul. If David stood behind the storm, Ratty was behind David; goading him and lashing him on. She knew how Ratty's light eyes could goad and how her tongue could lash. . . . Yes, it went back to Ratty. Ratty's triumphant revenge was in every peal of thunder; in each shrill, punishing note of the wind; Ratty's force was there, conducting the whole mad orchestra of sounds.

Pandemonium again, while she crouched closer to the floor, hiding her face against her arm, till the frenzied worst of it was passed. . . .

Causes and results; they went back to the beginning of time! No stopping at Ratty any more than at David. Beyond David, Ratty; and beyond Ratty, that beloved sister—and Victor. That past he had seen in David's eyes, rising up and hitting him! Hitting blindly, impartially and with a vengeance! Hitting others beside himself. . . . Fear suddenly filled her heart and came shrieking from her lips:

"Jim! Victor! Anybody!"

In the racket of the storm her cry didn't carry across the cabin, but as if in direct answer to it Barry pushed open the door and came lurching towards her. Saw the terror in her face and was down on the floor beside her, salt water running from his shoulders. Her terror died as she put out her hands and clung to him. He held her close a moment, then said:

"Life-belts, Judith. Captain's orders."

She looked up close into his face.

"Tell me the rest of it, Jim."

He told her.

"The wind's veering. Trepol thinks we may be driven ashore . . ."

"And that may mean . . . ?"

He wouldn't answer the unfinished question.

"Just that we must be prepared."

Suddenly she raised her hands to his shoulders and pulled herself as near to him as his clumsy oily allowed. Straining her face towards his, she kissed his lips softly, and then spoke against them.

"I give you everything I am; every minute of my life, past and to come; every thought of my mind; every beat of my heart. . . . All in this one kiss, Jim; because if . . . we are to die, it is all that we can ever know of what might have been for us. If we have to die, take my kiss with you, because it means all that. And, Jim, give me one to go with me, too."

The merest forward movement of his head brought his lips upon hers. The kiss held: but if there were passion in it, they were neither aware of it. It was a thing so much greater; higher. A thing that held so much of the divine that the human was almost lost.

They drew apart, and without speaking another word, he helped her on with her life-belt and reeled his way from her across the cabin.

He was in the doorway again when the mad speed of the boat was suddenly checked with a violence that flung them forward. There was a quivering as if the whole boat, from stem to stern, shivered; and then a tearing, rending sound that spoke of gallant timber being torn and splintered as if it were so much matchwood.

Judith, on her knees on the floor of the cabin, uttered a cry.

"We've struck, Jim!" she cried out. "Stay with me!"

The *White Crest* rose, righted herself for a moment, then dashed with greater violence than ever upon the rocks that had stayed her mad, storm-driven career. The tearing and rending sounded afresh, and the *White Crest* took a sudden steep list to port.

Judith was hurled across the cabin and struck her head against the corner of a fixed dressing-table. She lay still, feeling that she was swinging down into a smothering, unfathomable darkness.

The rest was confusion, and she was conscious only dimly of all that was happening.

She caught a flashing sight of Barry's white face as he strove to lift her up, scarcely able to keep up himself, and heard the sound of Jason's voice shouting to them above the storm.

Then the rushing of water and the sudden wash of it around her feet. Barry was dragging her along; somehow; somewhere. . . . Now the water was up to her knees. . . .

Into the oblong of light that was the open doorway, a fantastically tall, gesticulating figure thrust itself, and through the sounds of shouting and the roar of rushing water the sudden, hysterical shrieking of David Rattray's voice tore shrilly:

"She's free! She's free! Judith! I've set you free!"

She tried to fight off the clouding of her consciousness; struggled to shriek back an answer to his madness, but felt again that she was swinging down; deeper and deeper . . . Into darkness. . . . Down

. . . down . . . Until blackness covered over her; wrapped around her, and the boat, the water, the storm and the shouting just all went out. . . .

. . . . . .

The next thing she was really clear about was a blinding light shining full and painfully on her eyes. So painfully that she closed her eyes tight and held them closed while memory returned, slowly, still full of confusion.

At first she thought she was still on the boat because she seemed to feel the movement of it quite distinctly, but then, opening her eyes again and accustoming them to the light, she realized that she was in her own room at home, that the light which had seemed so blindingly vivid was only the average light of a mellow summer afternoon, shining in through familiar windows. Now she saw that there were two people in the room, and her bemused eyes travelled from one to the other of them: a clean-shaven, elderly man talking quietly to a uniformed nurse. . . . Of course, Doctor Byrne, whom she'd met with Victor several times. And his nurse. . . . Then she must have been ill. . . . But she didn't feel ill; only tired. . . .

"The storm's gone." She heard her own voice as if it were someone else's.

Doctor Byrne and the nurse both turned to her.

"Yes, cleared away completely," he said, and he laid a hand on her forehead and then felt her pulse. "That's better, Mrs. Jason," he said encouragingly. "That's much better."

Suddenly the whole thing rushed back upon her

mind. That mighty confusion stabbed by the sharp sounds of sudden voices and the sight of white faces.

Her eyes widened, dark with fear.

"Where is he!" she cried out, suddenly clinging to the nurse. "What became of him! What . . ."

The woman soothed her as best she could, then turned to the doctor questioningly.

"Mrs. Jason . . ." began Doctor Byrne.

"I know," broke in Judith, in an oddly clear, abrupt tone. "He's dead; drowned. Gone down in that dreadful . . ." She caught a breath and lay back on her pillows, her face as white as their linen. "Oh, you can't deceive me!" she added bitterly. And she turned over to hide the tears that came scorchingly into her eyes.

Dead silence reigned for a moment, then she raised herself on her elbow and faced them again.

"Tell me! Tell me every bit. Don't keep one detail from me. I'll . . . I'll get to know it all somehow."

"Better to tell her," came the grave voice of the doctor. "Mrs. Jason, the boat was smashed, you know, on the rocks round the point of the bay. . . . Smashed to atoms. . . ."

"Yes?" Judith's hand caught at his sleeve. He patted her hand soothingly.

"Mr. Barry and one of the crew—young fellow called Stevens—managed to get you ashore in one of the boats. It was impossible for your husband to get to you. . . ." Doctor Byrne paused.

"Yes? Tell me . . . oh, do tell me quickly!"

"When you were ashore, Barry discovered that your husband hadn't managed to make it, and—like

the gallant madman he is—he put back—single-handed, because he wanted to leave the man to bring you home—in a ghastly sea, and . . ."

Judith's hands were shaking his arm feverishly. "Yes? Yes? Oh, I know what you are going to say . . ." The words tumbled from her blanched lips.

"I'm afraid you do, Mrs. Jason. It was too late. Your husband had been hurt by a fallen mast. Barry got him back—God knows how!—but he was already . . ."

"My husband? Victor? Are you speaking of him? *He* is dead? He . . ."

Doctor Byrne nodded gravely.

"He was dead before the boat touched shore. Barry could not have done more than he did. . . . Be brave, Mrs. Jason; bear up. . . ."

"I thought . . . I thought . . ." Judith's voice rose shrilly, and suddenly she broke into wild laughter.

She was calm again presently and asked in a quiet, controlled voice if she could see Barry.

"Is he well enough to come to me? Rested? Unhurt?" she added.

"Yes, he has slept and is up again now. I'll go and tell him myself." Doctor Byrne went out of the room and Judith turned to the nurse.

"What time is it?"

"Nearly five."

"When was I brought back?"

"About two this morning. Doctor Byrne was sent for at half-past."

"It's a long time ago then!" cried Judith. "Was he . . . Mr. Jason . . . brought home, too?"

"There, try not to think. . . . Try not to dwell . . ."

Judith turned calm eyes upon her.

"I'm all right now. Just tired and a little weak. You can tell me anything now."

"Yes, Mrs. Jason. He was brought home."

"Thank you, nurse. It's much better to know things. It's terrible to be kept in the dark. . . ."

"You've been ill, though. We thought you might be going to be seriously ill, but you pulled round."

"I can't remember anything much after the boat struck. . . . That's a sound I shall never forget. I never did like the boat."

Judith shuddered.

"You'll like it less than ever now," said the nurse sympathetically.

A colour came into Judith's white cheeks. The nurse was giving her sympathy for the loss of her husband! And she must accept it and give thanks for it. Even though she knew that she was not hurt by Jason's death, except as the thought of death hurts everyone. And yet, suddenly remembering the last that she had seen of him, she was glad that she had spoken as she had; given him the forgiveness for which he had prayed. She hadn't known at the time how near to death he stood, and so the gift of forgiveness had not been wrung from her by any distorted sentiment, but had sprung spontaneously. She was glad of that, too. She lay for a while still and quiet on her pillows, thinking sombrely. Then:

"I think I hear Mr. Barry outside. I'd like to see him alone, please."

When Barry appeared in the doorway, the nurse

spoke to him in a low voice, warning him that Mrs. Jason was feeling her husband's death acutely and that she mustn't be upset. A warning Barry accepted with a face set like stone. Whereupon the nurse slipped out of the room and left him with Judith.

He approached her quietly, not letting her see how frightened he was by the shadows that lay around her eyes and the paleness of her usually so very red lips.

She held out her hand and he caught it in both his, but had to swallow hard before he could speak. Then:

"How are you, Judith?"

She smiled up at him very slightly, very tremulously, just to try to reassure him.

"I'm all right, Jim. You looked after me well."

Her voice petered out and for a time neither of them could utter a word. Their hands were closely clasped and his fingers were working upon hers.

She looked up into his face searchingly.

"And you?" she said at last.

"Nothing wrong with me." His voice was gruff with feeling.

She saw the signs of stress and strain in him; they were there clear enough for anyone to read; possibly they would, neither of them, ever quite shake off the marks that night of storm had left. But his face, drawn though it was, reassured her.

"I thought at first that you were . . . dead," she whispered. "And all the time it was *he* . . ."

"Yes, he's dead, Judith." He whispered too.

"And David Rattray?"

"Rattray, too. His body was washed up this afternoon, they tell me." He spoke soberly, but with no tone to suggest that there was anything very personal

to Judith in David's death. He knew nothing of that; to him, young Rattray had been no more than a member of Jason's crew.

"And the rest, Jim? Trepol and the men?"

"All safe; though I believe Trepol was a bit knocked about."

Judith was silent again for some time. Then she said:

"They say you went back for Victor. In a terrible sea . . ."

He broke in quickly; disclaimingly.

"I *had* to. No virtue in that. I couldn't have looked life in the face again if I hadn't made every effort . . ."

"No; I understand that," she put in quickly.

"I thought he'd left the yacht. He shouted to me to take you; that he was all right, but couldn't get near you. So I took you. And he was left. . . . Pinned down by a mast which had crushed his legs. *That's* why he couldn't get to you; he couldn't move. Only in the dark and the tangle of rigging and the dashing of waves I couldn't get the thing sorted out. Stevens and I got you ashore in one of the small boats, thinking that Jason and Trepol and Smith would be in the other one. Smith and Trepol were; Jason wasn't. They had thought he was with us. . . . It was so ghastly dark that none of us knew what we were doing." Barry stopped speaking.

"And then you went back for him; alone. . . ." Her voice was low and still.

"Trepol was pretty well knocked out and Smith had a torn shoulder. Stevens had to bring you home. There was no one but myself. . . ." He broke off,

drawing a breath. Then: "It was my job, Judith. Not theirs. It didn't even rest between me and him; nor between me and you. But quite simply between me and God. I don't know if you can see it. It was clear and unmistakable to me last night."

"I do see," she put in quickly. "And I'm glad you went back. It sets us both at peace. Was he dead when you got to the wreck?"

"No. He died in the small boat. The wind had gone down to some extent by then, and the water, once I could get into the harbour, was quieter. He was terribly shattered and hoped he was unconscious. But he wasn't."

"Did he speak?" asked Judith in a whisper.

"Once. Just to say a rather curious thing. He said: 'I had the power, but you've got all the glory. Make her happy, Jim.' " Barry's voice failed him utterly; his hand was crushing hers.

The silence in the room was intense.

"That was the first time," he said suddenly, "that he'd ever called me Jim."

The words did not sound to Judith at all irrelevant. She was looking up at him through blinding tears.

"A gallant death . . . whatever his life had been. A gallant death," she said stumblingly, and pulling down the lean, strong hand that held hers, she laid her wet cheek against it.

THE END

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